

Opinions

To curb prostitution, punish those who buy sex rather than those who sell it

By Jimmy Carter

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Jimmy Carter, the 39th president of the United States, is founder of the nonprofit Carter Center.

It is disturbing that some human rights and public health organizations are advocating the full legalization of the sex trade, including its most abusive aspects. I agree with [Amnesty International](#), [UNAIDS](#) and other groups that say that those who sell sex acts should not be arrested or prosecuted, but I cannot support proposals to decriminalize buyers and pimps.

Some assert that this “profession” can be empowering and that legalizing and regulating all aspects of prostitution will mitigate the harm that accompanies it. But I cannot accept a policy prescription that codifies such a pernicious form of violence against women. Normalizing the act of buying sex also debases men by assuming that they are entitled to access women’s bodies for sexual gratification. If paying for sex is normalized, then every young boy will learn that women and girls are commodities to be bought and sold.

There is a much better policy option.

In my 2014 book “[A Call to Action: Women, Religion, Violence and Power](#),” I described the approach known as the “Nordic model,” which is consistent with advancing human rights and healthy societies. Pioneered in Sweden and adopted most recently in [Canada](#) and [France](#), this strategy involves decriminalizing prostituted women and offering them housing, job training and other services. Instead of penalizing the victims, however, the approach treats purchasing and profiting from sex acts as serious crimes. Another key component is public education about the inherent harms of prostitution for those whose bodies are sold.

In Sweden, demand for prostitution [has fallen dramatically](#) under this model. Conversely, [Germany](#) and [New Zealand](#), which have legalized all aspects of prostitution, have seen an increase in sex trafficking and demand for sexual services.

Critics of the Nordic model assert that mature adults should be free to exchange money for sex. This argument ignores the power imbalance that defines the vast majority of sex-for-cash transactions, and it demeans the beauty of sexual relations when both parties are respected.

Sex between people who experience mutual enjoyment is a wonderful part of life. But when one party has power over another to demand sexual access, mutuality is extinguished, and the act becomes an expression of domination. As author and prostitution survivor [Rachel Moran](#) explained in her book, “[Paid For](#),” once money has exchanged hands, a woman must deliver whatever service the customer demands.

In May 2015, when the Carter Center held a [global summit to end sexual exploitation](#), sex-trade survivors, including

Moran, described their painful journeys through exploitation. They told of the abuse they suffered — abuse that should be understood as torture. They expressed their determination to speak not only for themselves but also for those who are either too traumatized to come forward or who perished as a result of homicide, suicide, drug abuse or disease. They compare their movement to the abolition of slavery, an institution that once also seemed like a permanent fixture in society.

Prostitution is not the “oldest profession,” as the saying goes; it’s the oldest oppression.

Those survivors told us that they once believed that selling sex was their choice but that this attitude was a requirement for survival — that only once they were fully free from the fetters of the trade were they able to fully understand their lack of choice.

If full legalization is adopted, it will not be the “empowered sex worker” who will be the norm — it will be the millions of women and girls needed to fill the supply of bodies that an unlimited market of consumers will demand. Where do we think these young girls in the sex trade will come from? (Most victims are girls, though some boys are exploited, too.) It is simply naive to oppose sex trafficking of children and women and at the same time support decriminalizing the buyers who create the demand and the pimps who profit from the supply of girls and women.

I believe it is better to help women and girls avoid a life of prostitution and to deter men from buying sex acts.

We must not abandon the equal dignity of each human being by simply regulating a form of abuse. There is a better way.

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