

Why do men buy sex?

The Interview: Professor Sven-Axel Mansson, Sweden



By MARIA JACOBSON

During the spring of 2002 he has appeared almost weekly in the Swedish media, where, with patient didacticism he has defended a Swedish law criminalizing the customer in the sex trade. Sven-Axel Mansson, Professor of Social Work at Gothenburg University in Sweden, has been fighting for this law for over 20 years.

This law has been on the statute books for three years now. It was challenged both before and after it was introduced, as well in Sweden as internationally. Two years after its introduction, however, 80 per cent of Swedes said that they were satisfied with the law.

Today though, many are beginning to question the extent to which the law is actually being enforced. Investigations into the legal system have revealed that the law's guardians - the police - are actually far more likely to act to protect those who buy sex than they are to do justice to this law.

Sven-Axel Mansson gives us his explanation:

- The effects of male bonding play a part in creating this situation. The police force is a male dominated institution, which is being asked to enforce a law, which threatens traditional male values. Their ability to fulfil this duty is compromised by the fact that policemen will be far more likely to identify with the buyers of sex than with its vendors.

The morning following my meeting with Sven-Axle Mansson, I am confronted by hand painted signs which have been fastened on to the lights regulating the traffic on the main road I have to cross on my way to work: STRIPTEASE! Phone 1234 56 78 90, they exclaim. The signs are facing the flow of the traffic. A sex entrepreneur, typical for our times, has obviously identified the marketing niche of bored drivers in a traffic jam and thought: why not get them to phone a stripper while waiting for the lights to change?

We are spared nowhere.

Sex tourism, trafficking, porn, prostitution, Internet sex, popular sex - the world seems to have entered a sex spiral.

Mansson, the Swedish grand old man in research on gender, violence, sexuality and prostitution has used the concept of invasion: we are invaded by conservative, "phallogcentrically whored" sex.

The 1970's: Black Business

Sven-Axel Mansson has studied prostitution since the mid-70's. It all started with an investigation into the nightclub culture of Malmo for the social authorities of the city, which he carried out together with his colleague Stig Larsson.

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The result was Svarta affärer (Black Business), a report which indicated that the sex industry had become a significant social problem. The report gave rise to concerns about the role and responsibility of Sweden's Welfare State in this area, which so far had regarded prostitution as a question of law and order - and therefore best dealt with by the police - and women involved in prostitution as deviant characters, as social dropouts.

The report led to a further four-year project on prostitution in Malmo, where Sven-Axel Mansson was both researcher and social worker. The aim was to persuade women in prostitution to give up their activities. In 1977 Mansson was also asked to join the

committee for the first Swedish state investigation into prostitution.

- The state investigation caused some commotion. It analysed prostitution in a new way: on one hand, it was seen as a reflection of the normal relations between men and women in society as a whole; on the other, it emphasised the role and responsibilities of men in the sex industry, says Mansson,

But the Chair of the committee, a right wing politician, disagreed with the experts on this viewpoint. Each of the members of the investigation except one was fired. Supported by feminists and women's associations, Sven-Axel Mansson and others subsequently published an alternative report with suggested actions, which came out simultaneously with the official investigation report in 1981. In the same year, he published his doctoral thesis on "the Relation between Pimp and Prostitute".

From 1984: Focussing on men

So far, Mansson had studied the 'sellers' of sex. His next book (also in Swedish) came in 1984 focusing on men as buyers of sex. Since then, he has explored this theme in several books and projects, a recent one in English called Men's Practices in Prostitution: the Case of Sweden, published in 2001. A couple of times Sven-Axel Mansson has returned to the women involved in prostitution and the Malmo project, also resulting in books and reports. Trafficking, violence against women, HIV and homosexuality are some of his other research topics.

When the second Swedish investigation into prostitution suggested that both customers and prostitutes should be criminalized, Sven-Axel Mansson resigned in protest.

- Men facing problems in their relations with women solve these by buying

sex. Thus, prostitution is a male problem. It would therefore be totally wrong to punish women," he argues. And finally in 1999 the law about sexual services came into force, criminalizing those who buy sex.

Pro-feminist law against violence

- This is a pro-feminist legislation against violence, which protects the most exposed women. The law is also a way of forcing men to stop regarding the female sex and the female body as a male privilege - a view many men have not yet given up or come to terms with. The silent acceptance among the great mass of men is a bigger problem than individual anti-feminists.

- Prostitution is a specific relation and situation which resonates with general relations between the sexes," says Mansson. - Regardless of variations over time and between cultures in the expression of dominance and subordination, they all contain the shared view of the male right of possession of the female body. In our society this is manifested in, amongst other things, the crime of rape and other forms of violence, pornography and the buying of sex.

The Swedish law can seem provocative, precisely because it challenges the idea of men's freedom from responsibility and, at the same time, it problematises masculinity - positioning men as bearers of gender.

As was stated at the beginning of this article, this law has been the object of lively debate both before and after its introduction. An opinion poll in the beginning of 2001 showed that 80 per cent of the Swedes were satisfied with the law.

During 1999 the amount of street prostitution was halved - but the trade itself was not curtailed. Instead, it moved into flats, brothels, hotels and massage parlours, a state of affairs, which can be used to argue that the law is in fact a failure. However, recently there has been some suggestion that the movement of the sex industry from the streets may be interpreted not as a failure of the law but rather of the legal sys-

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tem. Journalists are more frequently asking how the law is being enforced, rather than questioning the law itself.

Sweden's second largest newspaper, Goteborgs-Posten recently showed in a series of articles that the police and prosecutors are imposing buyers of sex lighter punishments than other criminals.

When the law had been in force 33 months, 249 men had been charged with buying sex - most of these for buying sex in the street. 26 had confessed and been fined without trial. 33 men had been sentenced to pay a fine by the court.

Identification with the buyers of sex

- The police are making efforts to stop street prostitution. It is questionable however whether this is an appropriate action. The law on buying sex is part of a larger group of laws on violence against women, the so-called kvinnofrid legislation. The legal system needs to co-ordinate actions aimed at fighting all forms of violence against women. Furthermore, a change in attitudes needs to happen in male environments, Mansson underlines.

It was also revealed that if men asked not to have their mail from the court of law sent to their home address, the authorities made an exception to their routines out of consideration for the fact that the man was married or cohabited and had children.

— I see this as a case of male bonding acting in the situation: the police force is a male, homosocial, conservative environment. Of course, the police can never say out loud that they don't consi-

der buying sex to be a crime - but in various ways they do protect men who buy sex. I think this is a question of identification with those men.

A few days after my meeting with Sven-Axel Mansson I heard him again, this time on the radio. He commented on a suspected case of procuring through ads in pornographic magazines, which a journalist had revealed but which the police had neither discovered nor investigated. As a reaction to this, the police in Stockholm soon afterwards announced that a group of 15 police officers would be assigned to work full time on the hidden sex trade.

Legalisation strengthens stigmatisation

Internationally, the new law has caused both scepticism and curiosity. The lobby for legalising prostitution is influential within the EU. The Netherlands and Germany equate prostitution with other enterprises. An absurd consequence of this can, for example, be that unemployed people maybe directed to this "profession", in the same way they are to other jobs.

- One of the arguments for the legalisation of prostitution is that a social recognition would free women in prostitution of the stigma and shame attached to what they do. Those who use this argument do not consider the evidence of what it means to continually be used for somebody else's lust, to be continually invaded and regarded as a dehumanised sex. And stigmatisation is not the only problem associated with prostitution, says Mansson. He is convinced that legalisation strengthens stigmatisation of the women involved in prostitution.

- The female body and sexuality would have to be exploited even more in a legalised market: competition would be as intense as it is in any other legitimate commercial market, where to be successful means screaming the loudest, offering the most dangerous, the most original products. The whore/Madonna concept, which is to say the view of female sexuality as bad and good, would be strengthened. The stigma of a whore

would be made into a legalised commercial tool.

Why do men buy sex?

Women in the sex market are profiled in a stereotypical way, often with racist overtones, "wild, untamed" African women are an example of animah'sation, whilst representations of "humble" Asian women are designed to stimulate the fantasies of the customers. Men, on the other hand, appear as more anonymous. Sven-Axel Mansson has interviewed many men and identified some of their reasons for buying sex, placing them into categories as follows:

- Men who live in a relationship and seek something different.

- These men feel that the relationship does not function and that their sex life is dissatisfying. Buying sex gives a moment of undemanding diversion. This group also includes men with sexual wishes and fantasies that they cannot, or dare not, express to their partner. Fantasies of the "whore" seem as important as the actual encounter with a prostitute. The whore is always available for male satisfaction. She is both attractive and repulsive, which arouses excitement and curiosity in these men.

- Men who experience problems in their contact with women - they "cannot get women in any other way".

- The basic reason for failure in relationships for these men may be shyness, fear, old age, physical or mental dysfunction. They talk, above all, about longing for a woman, not specifically a prostitute. The prostitute becomes a comfort and the purchase of sex is more an expression of loneliness and contact problems than of lust. Behind all this might also lie a wish for control of and revenge on women in general. In all, this is an expression of powerlessness and fear, and probably confusion, rather than desire and lust.

- These men may think that modern women have unrealistically high expectations of the pace and extent of change in their attitudes, as they hold

on to certain historically male ideals.

- Men who abuse sex, for whom feelings and certain behaviours are channelled through sexuality.

Other categories have been formulated by, for example, the Norwegian sociologists Prieur and Taksdal:

- "Losers" - traditional men who are frustrated with the fact that the conventional relations between men and women are changing and seek the well-known model of dominance and subordination.

- "Fiddlers" - usually younger men who are not capable of maintaining real relationships and who regard sex as any other form of consumption, a kind of McSex without context. Their view of sexuality is defined by pornography and violence.

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Sex on the Internet

- why and how?

- For the latter group the Internet means that sex is more easily available than before," says Sven-Axel Mansson. - Nowadays there is no need to go out into the streets. One can sit at home or in the office and buy sex or consume pornography.

According to a survey of one month in 2001, every fifth Swedish man under the age of 35 visited a website directly related to sex. Sven-Axel Mansson, together with a research team at the Department of Social Work in Gothenburg, has this year started a project looking at sex on the Internet - exploring why and how it happens. The group co-operates with two American researchers and the study will be comparable to a corresponding American

one, which has already been completed.

The relation between supply and demand will also be explored.

— It is not a simple fact that demand is the driving force, Mansson says.

— The exploitation of poor women leads to a large supply and competition. This, in its turn, increases the risk of exposure and as a consequence, more "extreme" services are offered, among other places, on the Internet.

- It is the market that is the driving force. Demand is defined by the services produced, not vice versa, which contradicts certain popular traditional market theories.

He sees the Internet as a good example of how the logistics of the sex industry have changed during the latter half of the 20th century.

- The breeding ground for the sex trade lies in poverty and the suppression of women. Package tours, and later business travel, has led to sex tourism. For many women in poor countries this was the first step on their way to brothels and sex trade in Europe, the USA and other countries. The boundary between the supply of sexual services and household services is very vague within international trafficking in women.

Together with researchers from India, Thailand and Italy, Sven-Axel Mansson is involved in an additional research project focused on trafficking in women.

— The other week I watched a programme on television, which investigated the au pair system. To work as an au pair is supposed to involve exchange and language learning. The programme showed that the majority of au pairs in Sweden come from poor Eastern European countries and work for rich families in the posher areas of large cities. They are commonly sexually harassed and forced to provide sexual services. This is a totally unregulated market - and Sweden is part of it, even if we would rather ignore this fact.

And what about the STRIPTEASE signs by the traffic lights? I tore them down on my way home.

MARIA JACOBSON
freelance journalist, Sweden