

France Takes First Steps Towards Abolition of Prostitution

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While authoring *Les Misérables*, the celebrated [Victor Hugo](#) wrote in 1862 that despite affirmations slavery had vanished from European civilization, it still existed -- as prostitution imposed on women. In December 2013, the French Assembly finally heeded its lionized sage and overwhelmingly [passed a bill](#) imposing stiff fines on sex buyers, while exempting from criminal liability those who sell sex, offering prostituted people exit strategies and assistance.

With this dramatic reform, the French legislature's Lower House followed its Nordic neighbors -- Sweden, Iceland and Norway -- asserting that [prostitution creates a system of exploitation](#), inflicting considerable harm on women and society. According to polls, [73 percent of the French](#) surveyed favor the abolitionist law. The French Senate will consider the bill this summer.

The Nordic Model, as this set of laws is known, views the sex trade as irreconcilable with gender equality and refuses to consider prostitution as inevitable. For France, which once romanticized the "[droit du seigneur](#)," the right of a feudal lord to rape a vassal's bride, this move towards the Nordic Model is a striking turn of events, catalyzed by grassroots feminist and survivors' efforts with galvanizing support from the charismatic Minister of Women's Affairs, [Najat Vallaud-Belkacem](#).

Since its introduction, the law has triggered passionate debate in France, with raucous television talk shows in tow relishing the circus. A motley crew of self-dubbed "[343 bastards](#)" signed a petition exhorting the government to "keep your hands off my whore."

Supporters of the legislation vigorously condemn the idea that men are legally and culturally entitled to purchase women's bodies to fulfill their sexual fantasies. Others, in opposition, claim the measure will further marginalize prostituted women, endangering them more.

"What marginalizes prostituted women is prostitution," [says Vallaud-Belkacem](#). "This law focuses on the buyer of sex who undeniably participates in the exploitation of another person's body."

While deliberating its prostitution laws in the 1990s, the Swedish government also established a [direct link between prostitution and sex trafficking](#). Without one, the other would not exist.

In several European countries, substantial numbers of foreign, undocumented prostituted women, are clear indicators of human trafficking. France, in particular, noted a [dramatic increase](#) from 10% of prostituted foreign-born women in 1990 to close to 90% today; in [Germany](#) and [the Netherlands](#), the rate hovers at 75-80%. In

countries where prostitution is legal, such as Germany and the Netherlands, elected officials and law enforcement are wrestling with the impact of legalization, including the exponential growth of both legal and illegal brothels - and sex trafficking. Germany is now tagged the ['bordello of Europe.'](#)

The hope behind legalization is that governments can better protect prostituted women and control a sex trade rife with violence, stigmatization, denigration and disease. Instead, [legalization fosters](#) a flourishing, multi-billion-dollar underground industry that triggers market-driven battles for the cheapest sex, with or without the use of condoms, demanding a flowing supply of young, trafficked women.

Compelled to confront this uncontrollable sex industry, the Amsterdam Council introduced measures to [impose language skills](#) tests in brothels and are tinkering with [raising the legal age](#) of prostitution from 18 to 21. These harm reduction measures seem at best Kafkaesque in light of the Dutch government's realization that pervasive violence and subordination are endemic to the sex trade.

"Prostitution is a vulnerable profession," said the former Amsterdam mayor [Eberhard van der Laan](#). "It often involves an unequal power relationship between owners and prostitutes. We need to change that power relationship."

Wherever you stand, recognition that violence, stigmatization, rampant police abuse and risk of death for prostituted women is established. What rages is the debate about possible solutions. On one side, the sex industry and its proponents argue that prostitution is just another job or "sex work," to use a term created by its supporters to normalize and mainstream prostitution. Legalize it and the government can make it safe. The other side, led by abolitionists, believes the Nordic Model will dry up the demand for commercial sex and promote gender equality.

France's bold steps targeting the industry of prostitution and its spectrum of exploitation show commitment to protecting the human rights of the most vulnerable among us. When Minister Vallaud-Belkacem [addressed the legislative assembly](#) after the vote, she thanked them for not seeing exploitation as inevitable and for looking at prostitution the way it exists, not the way it is imagined.