

Violence, Sex or Work? Claims-making against the Swedish ban on the purchase of sexual services on the Internet

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1 Introduction

An intense debate and political struggle is taking place both internationally and in many countries on whether prostitution should be considered as violence or work, as an expression of coercion or as agency, and whether the provider of sexual services should be seen as unfree or free (Sanders, O'Neill and Pitcher, 2009). Sweden represents a quite unique context in this debate, as all political parties represented in the Swedish parliament, from left to right, are in favour of the Swedish ban on the purchase of sexual services. This legislation was introduced in 1999 and, at the time, was controversial because it defines prostitution as violence against women and only criminalises the purchase of sexual services and not their sale. In this way Sweden introduced a new system of regulating prostitution, a 'Swedish model', which did not fit previously adopted regulatory systems and 'prostitution regimes' (Skillbrei and Holmström, 2011).

Despite the fact that there is a strong consensus in parliament and in society in favour of the law (Kuosmanen, 2008), we have found on the Internet several examples of claims-making against the Swedish ban on the purchase of sexual services. This claims-making highlights an opinion that seldom seems to reach the public debate offline. The Internet, in fact, offers the possibility of exchanging opinions, mobilising, and making claims anonymously but nevertheless in an effective way, expressing opinions that are not socially accepted or politically correct as in the case of anti-immigration advocacy on the Internet (cf. Pyrhönen, 2012). The claims that are made against the Swedish prostitution policy could, in fact, be interpreted by a larger audience as an expression of anti-feminism, as the law so clearly has been framed as a step in a national progress towards gender equality (cf. Harrington 2012). Marginalised and stigmatised groups, such as sex clients, sex workers, and prostitutes (and their allies) might also have difficulties finding spokespersons that are willing to step forward and reveal their actual names and experiences (Scaramuzzino & Scaramuzzino 2011).

The aim of this article is to identify and describe 'claims-making' and mobilisation on the Internet against the Swedish prostitution policy and to explain arguments and positions by relating them to different 'prostitution regimes'. These regimes are models of policy identified in previous research to categorise the regulatory provisions adopted by states in addressing prostitution. We will argue that such models are related to different ways of interpreting the nature of the relations in prostitution, as well as different ways of defining individual freedom and the relation between the individuals and the state.

2 A qualitative content analysis

A sampling of websites was made starting with the three most popular and frequently used forums for people who share an interest in prostitution (Scaramuzzino G. forthcoming). On these forums sex-workers, clients and others interact not only for sexual purposes (flirting, sharing reviews of sex workers, finding clients or providers etc.) but also for discussing prostitution and making claims about policy and social welfare provisions.

Using a connective approach, we chose not to view these websites as confined places or spaces, but rather to follow connections in terms of links (cf. Hine 2003, Scaramuzzino G. 2012). During one year (2009) we looked at traces of claims-making against the Swedish ban on the purchase of sexual services as well as traces of mobilising and organising processes and of collective actors. We followed each link that seemed to be relevant, exploring its content and further connections. The total number of websites visited amounted to about 50, some of which included multiple forums and threads.

We have made a qualitative content analysis of the websites visited, and we have identified three distinct positions against the Swedish policy on prostitution. We have also found three collective actors that made use of the Internet for claims-making:

- 1) A network called ‘A cyber network fighting against the sexual repression of individuals’
- 2) Rose Alliance (National Organisation for Sex and Erotic Workers)
- 3) PRIS (Prostitutes Rights/Revenge in the Society)¹

Rose Alliance was the only collective actor in the study that was registered as a legal person at the time of the study.² There were, at the time of the study and as far as the authors are concerned, no other civil society organisations in Sweden that were interested in this area of policy and that had taken a clear stand against the Swedish policy on prostitution.

These three collective actors exemplify quite well the three positions that we had identified on the Internet, and which will be shown in the analysis. However it is important to remember that these positions were also supported by other non-organised individuals on forums and blogs, often referring to the same collective actors.

Claims-making can be described as “...not only forms of protest such demonstrations and political violence – the traditional focus of social movement studies – but also more routine forms of intervention in the public sphere such as public statements or political decisions” (Koopmans & Statham 2001:140). On the Internet, claims-making took mostly the form of public statements (e.g. through blogs and social media) but sometimes it related to activities that were not confined to cyberspace. Open letters to politicians, newspaper articles, scientific publications, sound clips and video clips from radio and television programs were linked to, or posted on, websites. Many texts, sound clips and video clips included representatives being interviewed but there were also examples of articles, anthology chapters, books and research

¹ During the period we gathered our data, PRIS’ website disappeared and was started again with a new address and content some months later (<http://www.nätverketpris.se> accessed 07-12-2009, 21:34).

² We also found traces of two other collective actors ROSEA (National Organisation for Sex and Erotic Workers) which turned out to be the old name of Rose Alliance and SANS (Sex Sellers and Allies Network in Sweden) which seems to have ceased its activities.

reports written by the representatives themselves (e.g. Eek, 2005; Lund, 2007; Jacobsen, 2007; Jakobson 2008).

On the Internet we encountered political activities at a grassroots level where the boundaries between individual and collective claims-making often became blurred as a consequence of the difficulties in estimating organisational strength in terms of structure and number of people involved (cf. Scaramuzzino R. 2012). To estimate the amount of people behind the identified collective actors, we relied on clues such as number of friends on Facebook, number of people signing online petitions and so forth. Our impression is that each organisation or network included, at most, a couple of hundred members and/or supporters and that there might also have been some overlapping between these groups.

3 Prostitution regimes: logic, control and freedom

Countries have developed different ways of regulating prostitution, and several typologies of 'prostitution regimes' or 'prostitution models' have been identified by previous research (Outshoorn, 2004). Terms like *prohibition*, *abolition*, *tolerance*, *regulation*, *legalization* and *decriminalization* are frequently used in the classification of prostitution policy in different regimes and models (e.g. Brants, 1998; Brent and Hausbeck, 2001; Westmarland and Gangoli, 2006; Scoular, 2010). Previous research often treats these models or regimes as describing actual national policies (e.g. Sweden as representing abolition), instead of being treated as analytical categories or ideal types (see Brants, 1998 for an exception). Using national policies to exemplify the regimes, and not vice versa, makes it difficult to grasp what 'prostitution regimes' actually are built on as we seldom encounter a set of variables that systematically shows cross-country differences, justifying the regimes.

For the purpose of this study, the prostitution models or regimes are interpreted as ideal types, which the actual national policies may approach to a greater or lesser degree, and which are useful as tools to identify similarities and differences (as long as the same aspects are in focus). In this article, we will be considering four different regimes that we term *prohibition*, *abolition*, *tolerance* and *legalization* with emphasis on the aim of the policy, its view of prostitution and provisions implemented.

Prohibition and abolition are similar in some aspects. In both of these regimes, the State's goal is to eliminate prostitution through various types of criminalization. Neither of these regimes makes a distinction between voluntary and forced prostitution. Prohibition and abolition, however, are based on logic that carries an important moral distinction. In the prohibition regime (e.g. Russia) the selling of sexual services is considered to be both illegal and immoral (Brants, 1998) while in the abolition regime (e.g. Sweden) those who are selling sexual services are regarded as victims of violence and exploitation, and not as criminals. Those who sell sexual services are not punished but rehabilitated and social interventions are aimed at helping people out of prostitution. Sweden, which is often classified as an abolitionist regime, has chosen to criminalise only the purchase of sexual services because this is considered an act of violence (Scoular and Sanders, 2010, Harrington 2012).

In the tolerance regime (e.g. Italy) prostitution is considered to be a private matter and a 'necessary evil' in the society. Prostitution is controlled only when it disturbs the public order or threatens public health, and not primarily to protect those who sell sexual services. The legalisation regime (e.g. Germany) is different as it recognizes some forms of prostitution as work, which is controlled by the market and regulated by labour laws. Consequently, making money from prostitution is not prohibited. The state controls sex workers by licensing,

mandatory health inspections and taxation. Also the tolerance and legalisation regimes carry an important moral difference in their logic, as they consider prostitution as a necessary evil (toleration) or as legitimate work (legalisation) (Brants, 1998), as well as placing prostitution in the private sphere (toleration) or the market (legalisation).

These prostitution regimes can also be considered as reflecting two different systems of ideas relating to opportunities on one hand, and coercion and obedience on the other, and two senses or concepts of liberty: *negative freedom* and *positive freedom*. The notion of negative freedom is about what the subject, individual or collective, can do or be, without interference by others whether by the State, or by other individuals or groups (Berlin, 2002). It answers the question of how many doors are open (or unlocked) for the individual to choose (Warburton, 2001). Negative freedom might be interpreted as the freedom of purchasing or selling sexual services without interference. It implies a relationship between the individual and the State where freedom is mirrored by the lack of interference of the State in the lives of individuals. In many aspects, the toleration and legalisation regimes can be interpreted as granting more negative individual freedom when it comes to selling and purchasing sexual services.

The notion of positive freedom is rather a question of what or who is the source of interference that can determine whether individuals or groups should do or be something instead of something else (Berlin, 2002). It is not a matter of how many doors might be unlocked, but rather which doors individuals actually are able to choose. It is about overcoming barriers that prevent the individuals from gaining control of their lives. In this sense, liberty implies a distinction between different levels of the self, and freedom is interpreted as being able to make informed, rational choices according to the 'higher self' and to avoid the choices that the 'lower self' would suggest (Warburton, 2001). It implies a relation between the State and the individual where freedom is mirrored by the way in which the State enables individuals to make the right choices. The Swedish model (as the prohibition and abolition regimes) can be seen as the realization of positive freedom because it supports individuals on their way towards self-realization by preventing them from making choices that in a certain situation, both as sex clients and providers of sexual services, might seem rational, but in fact would lead to misery and unhappiness.

Even if abolition and legalization rely on different views on prostitution, and as we argue here, different ways of defining individual freedom, previous research (e.g. Scoular and Sanders, 2010) shows that the local implementation of these two types of policies might actually lead to similar outcomes in terms of increased social control.

4 Sweden as a 'unique' context

Ever since the 1970s, there has been a debate in Sweden about if, and how to use legislation to reduce and even eliminate prostitution. Sweden, like many other countries in Europe, had already had a regulatory system for women, which was abolished in 1918 when a toleration regime was introduced. Neither criminalising only the selling of sexual services nor legalising prostitution have been considered viable alternatives, because of this historical heritage. The options considered were either to simply criminalise purchase of sexual services (abolition), or to criminalise purchasing and selling sex (prohibition) (cf. Svanström, 2004, 2006).

The introduction of a ban on the purchase of sexual services was part of a new policy, which did not fit previous prostitution regimes (cf. Skillbrei and Holmström, 2011). Since 1999, it is a criminal offense to purchase sexual services but not to sell such services. Prostitution was viewed as a threat against individual freedom, and the purchase of sexual services was

equated with violence against women. To purchase sexual services was seen as a social problem requiring social intervention. The government argued that by reducing the (male) demand for prostitution, (female) supply could also be reduced. Thus, a ban on the purchase of sexual services was an important instrument in preventing and combating prostitution and human trafficking for sexual purposes (SOU, 2010).

In Sweden it is the responsibility of the State and the municipalities to conduct preventive social work and to offer protection and assistance that enable people to *exit* prostitution, whether they are providers of sexual services or sex clients. 'Unlike in many other countries where efforts focus on harm reduction, the initiatives targeting prostitution in Sweden are mainly aimed at fighting prostitution by helping people out of prostitution or to stop purchasing sex' (SOU, 2010:33). Stockholm, Gothenburg and Malmö³ have special 'prostitution units' within the social services that engage in outreach activities, and offer motivational interviews and various forms of therapy and psychosocial support. Civil society organisations are a complement to the efforts of the authorities (SOU, 2010).

Scholars criticising the Swedish ban on purchase of sexual services (e.g. Gould, 2001; Kulick, 2005; Sanders, 2008; Dodilliet, 2009) often highlight the radical feminist basis of the law and the fact that it has been politicians and social workers rather than the women who sell sexual services who were active in the making of the ban. In many other countries, organisations and trade unions by and for sex workers started to emerge and demand rights as far back as the late 1960s and 1970s. This kind of mobilisation protested against women in the sex industry being looked upon and treated as victims and not recognized as workers, and thus deprived of agency and free will (Mathieu, 2003; Lopez-Embury and Sanders, 2009; see also Dodilliet, 2009). In Sweden, however, the strong welfare state and social interventions aimed at 'rescuing' people who sell sexual services, have contributed to the much later mobilisation and self-organising of prostitutes and 'sex workers' (Ringdal, 2004). It was not until 2003 that an organisation by and for sex workers was founded in Sweden (Svanström, 2006).

The Swedish legislation has received much international attention and there has been a great interest in the effect of the ban. Many countries have experienced growing problems with prostitution, and in particular, with human trafficking for sexual purposes, and have considered changing their current laws and using new methods of intervention.

Ten years after the introduction of the ban on the purchase of sexual services, the Swedish government requested an evaluation of the effect of the law on prostitution and human trafficking for sexual purposes. The evaluators reached the overall conclusion that the criminalisation had helped to combat prostitution as prostitution had at least not increased in Sweden as it had in other Nordic countries. According to the evaluators, the ban also functioned as a barrier to the establishment of human traffickers in the country. Furthermore, street prostitution had been reduced by half as a direct result of the ban on the purchase of sexual services (SOU, 2010:34–35). There were indications that prostitution on the Internet had increased, but this increase was not greater than in neighbouring countries. There were no indications that the ban had led to street prostitution being replaced by Internet prostitution (SOU, 2010).⁴

³ The three most populous cities in Sweden.

⁴ It might be important to mention however that, beside street prostitution, there are no reliable statistical data of the extent of prostitution in Sweden.

An important premise of the evaluation was that the purchase of sexual services was to remain criminalised. One of the modifications proposed by the evaluators was that the maximum penalty for purchase of sexual services should be raised from six months to one year of imprisonment (SOU, 2010), a measure that was implemented in 2011. In the evaluation, the ban on purchase of sexual services, however, is described as only one of many instruments in the fight against prostitution and trafficking. Social work interventions are also seen as essential in preventing and fighting prostitution and trafficking in human beings for sexual purposes.

The evaluators also reached the conclusions that the aggravation of women's situation in prostitution feared by many as a consequence of criminalisation had not taken place. Those who had left prostitution generally had a positive view of the legislation; whereas those who still were 'exploited' in prostitution had a negative view (SOU, 2010:38). The latest survey about the general attitudes towards the ban on the purchase of sexual services in Sweden showed, however, that a vast majority (71%) wanted to retain the law (Kuosmanen, 2008:362). Only one-fifth of the respondents, however, thought that the number of sex clients had been reduced since criminalization. A majority (59%) of the respondents also indicated that they also wanted to criminalise the sale of sexual services (Kuosmanen, 2008:367).

It is in this context that the claims-making on the Internet should be viewed. The following sections will present the different positions identified in relation to prostitution regimes and different interpretations of individual freedom.

5 The 'free whore' and the sex client as symbols for negative freedom

This first position identified was mostly expressed within a heterogeneous group that included men and women, people that purchased and that provided sexual services, other sex workers, sympathizers, as well as the 'cyber network fighting against the sexual repression of individuals'.

From this position the so called 'free whore' and the sex client were used as symbols for claiming more individual freedom in its negative interpretation:

"The established power and the old media must yield to the will of the people and we with a true liberal view of life must come together from left to right. The free whore and the man who purchase sexual services are important symbols of this fight".⁵

This quote also contains a fairly common description of a 'we' as 'liberal vanguard' for which the sex client and the woman in prostitution became symbols in a far-reaching conflict against 'them' represented by 'feminists', 'social democrats' and other groups branded as 'moralists'. These groups were accused of trying to control aspects of human life that should belong to the private sphere. 'Swedish men are criminalized in the name of feminism. This [prostitution] is an act that lacks both perpetrators and victims - purchasing sex between consenting adults'.⁶

This position often entails a presentation of a conflict against the representatives of an ideology that is labelled as 'radical feminism'. Sometimes the concept of 'State feminism' was also used to emphasise that such ideology had been incorporated by the Swedish State. The ideology was described as hostile against men and stigmatising both people who provided, and those who purchased, sexual services. The representatives of this ideology were

⁵ <http://www.sexworkers-rights.blogspot.com> (accessed 2009-08-21, 13:45)

⁶ Ibid.

also held responsible for the repression of dissent and of lifestyles that were judged as incompatible with its moralistic logic.

Sweden was thus described as a country where ‘abolitionists’ used governmental power to ban the purchase of sexual services, and thereby limiting people’s individual freedom, closing doors that should have been left open for the individual, and limiting sex clients’ freedom with the ultimate goal of eliminating prostitution from society.

This conflict was expressed repeatedly on several websites and by people with different roles in prostitution. Some actors also highlighted this conflict as if it were not only sexual freedom that was at stake, but rather freedom in society as a whole:

“Generally, we seem to have reached a crossroads in history where politicians are trying to suppress free speech and our freedom by taking control of our lives and over the Internet. We as citizens must take back our gradually limited habitat. The Internet and the blogosphere are the battlefield where the fight will be. And I’m keeping my fingers crossed that freedom and justice will prevail...”⁷

This quote addresses various dimensions of the perceived conflict. Democracy is perceived as threatened, and the Internet is the new battlefield. Sex clients, in particular, strongly emphasized more individual freedom and a ‘freer’ society where the State would not try to control and regulate human behaviour as long as decisions were made with ‘free will’. They emphasised and claimed the individual freedom of choosing how to live their lives, what relationships they wanted to be involved in, and in what way. From this perspective, the State should refrain from interfering in such matters and from defining what is right and wrong, good and harmful, desirable or not, and determining who is the victim, the perpetrator, the exploiter, and the exploited person. This position claims freedom in a negative interpretation and more specifically, the freedom to choose to purchase or to sell sexual services without interference from the State. Such a claim underlies the importance of ‘as many doors as possible to be unlocked’ for the individual.

In general, the representatives of this position made claims for a legalisation of prostitution in Sweden, following the example of Germany, and demanded governmental recognition of sex as work. They used the polarisation between the legalisation regime and the abolition regime in their arguments and presented legalisation as freedom from law and repression.

Previous research, however, has highlighted that laws are complex and what might appear to be the absence of regulation might actually hide regulatory measures (Scoular and Sanders, 2010). These two regimes, legalisation and abolition, even though relying on different views on prostitution, could lead to similar outcomes in their implementation, in certain aspects. Both regimes often result in increasing social control through welfare agencies by civil licensing and inspections in the legalisation regime, and in rehabilitation, rescue projects and punishments in the abolition regime. Legalisation as a regime can still be considered as expressing more of a negative interpretation of individual freedom for the sex clients, as the purchase of sexual services is legal. Providers of sexual services are also free to sell sexual services but only as long as they do not have any sexually transmitted disease and they submit themselves to extensive social control. This more controlling side of the regime could be interpreted as an expression of a positive view of freedom closing the door for the ‘bad’, ‘risky’ forms of prostitution.

⁷ Ibid.

6 'Sex and erotic workers': Individual freedom to sell sexual services

The second position emerged mostly when claims were made by and among providers of sexual services or 'sex and erotic workers' and by the Rose Alliance (a national organisation for sex and erotic workers). We estimate that this position stood for the most claims-making on the Internet.

The actors behind this position were mostly female activists. Even though they often mentioned their allies (including erotic workers), they primarily seemed to share an understanding of a 'we' as people who sell or provide sexual services. In contrast with the 'system critical' set of ideas and arguments that emphasised the voluntary nature of the choice to sell sex (the first position). This position was more 'policy-critical' and emphasised not only the negative aspects of the Swedish ban, but also of the prostitution business/industry and of being a provider of sexual services in general. In fact, the broad interpretation of the conflict that we have seen in the first position was less common among providers of sexual services. It seems that prostitution and its conditions and consequences were the main focus of these claims.

As for the first position the antagonists in such claims were the supporters of the abolitionist regime (the 'feminists'), but also the professionals from social services who did not recognise people who sell sexual services as capable of making their own decisions. The representatives of this position were critical of a political culture that they felt excluded from decision-making processes in times when users' involvement was at the top of the political agenda. They were in this sense denied a role as a party/partner in a potential dialogue about prostitution policy:

"Do politicians and decision makers listen to us? Do the feminists care about the female sexuality and work so that it is not suppressed? No! All sex workers in Sweden are let down by the feminists and politicians who blindly follow the prostitution policy without seeing how the reality is!"⁸

Sweden was often described as a deviant country because of the ban of the purchase of sexual services, as it was argued that moral principles formed the basis of legislation that condemned certain categories of people and certain relationships. Sweden was described as a 'moral morass'. On the Internet, sex workers underscored that the Swedish ban on the purchase of sexual services made no distinction between freedom and coercion in prostitution, as persons that were trafficked for sexual purposes were equated to independent escorts. Further on, it was argued that Sweden had a 'suffocating hostile sexual culture' in which the State in the name of equality, but based on the old Christian moral principles, tried to prevent people from expressing their sexuality freely and pursuing their chosen lifestyles. In other words, sex workers opposed the treatment of all forms of purchased sexual services as violence and the assertion that selling sex, regardless how, why and by whom, was *per se* 'bad'.

In this position, claims were also made against what was called the 'whore stigma'. It was argued that the Swedish ban on the purchase of sexual services stigmatised providers of sexual services not only as 'prostitutes' but also as 'victims'. Such a fight against social stigmatisation had apparently also stimulated cooperation between sex and erotic workers

⁸ <http://sensuellqkonsult.worldpress.com> (accessed 2009-03-02, 12:54)

(upholding this position) and drug users. The website for the International Network of People who Use Drugs⁹ (INPUD) attributed this cooperation to a meeting between their organisation and the Rose Alliance. Both organisations claimed that it was difficult to find their own voice among professionals who wanted to speak for them and that they wanted to escape the forced victim role.

The actors behind this position protested against being labelled as incapable of making own rational decisions using their free will and as not able to define their own good. This position was informed by a clear opposition to one of the most important assumptions in the positive interpretation of freedom, to wit, that the individual is divided into a higher and lower self, and that he or she is not always capable of making the right decisions, a logic that characterises the Swedish prostitution policy. The way in which the law and its implementation labelled the women in prostitution as victims of violence, incapable of rational choice was perceived as limiting the freedom of acting as a subject.

The actors behind this position also made claims against professionals working with social intervention since they allegedly did not recognize that sex and erotic workers actually could make an informed, rational choice to sell sexual services. Instead professionals on moral grounds supported individuals on their path towards self-realization by preventing them from 'bad' decision-making and by 'helping' them leave prostitution. This position thus highlighted individual freedom in its negative interpretation but it did so mostly through a strong criticism of the positive interpretation of freedom present in the Swedish policy and its implementation through social intervention.

Actors making claims from this position seem to be more positive towards a return to a toleration regime, like the one in Sweden before the ban, rather than demanding the introduction of a legalization regime; this despite the fact that the use of the term 'sex and erotic worker' can be seen as more coherent with a legalisation regime. Such a term, however, is commonly used also in many countries that adopt toleration regime policies.

According to this position, prostitution should be neither legal nor illegal, but rather, a private matter. Representatives of this position in fact opposed a system of licensing and inspection that would arise with the introduction of a legalisation regime especially because of the social control that such system implies. They made claims, however, for the introduction of harm reduction measures, which also are described in previous research as enhancing social control (Scoular & Sanders 2010).

As this position also implies a distinction between 'good' and 'bad' prostitution, the issue is not really whether prostitution should be prohibited or legalised but rather where the line between acceptable and the unacceptable forms should be drawn. In this sense, this position, too, is informed by a positive interpretation of freedom.

The actors making claims from this position seem to be the ones that are engaging mostly in international activities. Many of the objectives and requests expressed from this position, for example, were taken from the 'Sex Workers in Europe Manifesto' of 2005 which we found on website of The International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe (ICRSE)¹⁰, and from the eight principles that were available on website of the Sex Workers'

⁹ <http://inpud.net> (accessed 29-10-2009, 11:22)

¹⁰ <http://www.sexworkereurope.org> (accessed 29-10-2009, 15:33)

Rights Advocacy Network (SWAN) in Central and Eastern Europe and Central Asia.¹¹ Both ICRSE and SWAN were in favour of harm reduction measures and called for ‘democracy, civil and human rights’ for person who sell sexual services.

These international activities could be interpreted as an attempt to transcend the polarisation that the different prostitution regimes and their logic produce, by focusing mostly on the outcome of policy and on alleged anti-oppressive forms of social work provisions.

Spokespersons that made claims from this position in Sweden had been part of the organisation of international conferences in which sex workers from different countries and with different experiences had met. At one of these conferences, representatives of sex workers had prepared joint policy documents and sent them to the European Parliament while a demonstration was being held on the streets of Brussels (see also Andrijasevic et al. 2012).

Swedish sex and erotic workers hence tried to influence Swedish national policy by using other larger networks and organisations in Europe. However, it was difficult both at national level and across borders to agree on several issues relating to prostitution. Despite differences, some common key points were formulated:

“Common to all of us at the conference was that we are tired of being objects in a debate; we are rather subjects in our own lives and for our own actions. The results of the conference was not the wish that prostitution should be legalised, in that matter we have many different opinions. We try not to deny that there are people who suffer in the sex industry, but we prefer to define ourselves and have a say in how we are going to be ‘saved’. And we do not require an absolute recognition of sex workers as a regular profession; some consider it more a part of private life. What united us was that we finally learned that human rights are meant for all people, including us, and we demand such rights to be respected”.¹²

7 ‘Prostitutes’: The individual freedom from having to sell sexual services

This last position seemed to emerge, like the second position, when people with experience from the sex industry got together and the understanding of a ‘we’ seemed to include mostly women. PRIS (Prostitutes Rights/Revenge in the Society), which represented this last position, however, also seemed to have its allies and friends. This last position differed, in many respects, from the two we have described above mainly because it was not critical of the Swedish ban on the purchase of sexual services *per se*, but rather critical and worried about some alleged consequences of the Swedish ban. The antagonists, from the point of view of these actors, seem to be both the social services and those representing the above-mentioned first and the second positions, the so called ‘happy whores’.

PRIS was critical of the whole sex industry and of the idea that prostitution would be considered a regular job, and emphasized the importance of helping women out of prostitution. The organisation stood behind the values of the Swedish women's movement, feminism and the abolitionist regime. PRIS was critical to the Swedish ban not because of the criminalisation of sex clients, but rather because of the lack of help available for those who sell sexual services: ‘The criminalization of the punters gave new money - to the police. But the social service did not get more funds or knowledge to help women out of prostitution’ as could be read on their website.¹³

¹¹ <http://swannet.org> (accessed 29-10-2009, 16:20)

¹² <http://www.rfsu.se> (accessed 29-10-2009, 11:23)

¹³ <http://www.natverketpris.se> (accessed 02-03-2009, 14:20)

This last position emphasised equal dignity, empowerment and freedom with social responsibility. The position shows a clear ‘user’ perspective’ with an ambition of highlighting the social interventions that might have been beneficial for persons with experiences from the sex industry, but also of criticising the social services’ alleged lack of interest in the users’ own views of their problems. The PRIS website contained the following:

“When the ban on the purchase of sexual services will have an impact on the social services in all municipalities - not only in the larger cities, when the social workers’ knowledge of prostitution and women’s condition has improved and when even prostitution centres may provide financial assistance, when solidarity with weaker groups will be a natural part of an otherwise rather cold Sweden, then I may no longer get a phone call in the middle of the night from desperate women. Or I will at least be able to refer these women to a social service that works”.¹⁴

PRIS claimed that the social services in Sweden had no interest in listening to their perspective and to the experiences and opinions of the group they represented. They also claimed that the women in prostitution they represented did not get any help to exit prostitution.

As those making claims from the second position, these actors, too, argued that instead of being treated like a resource in society, especially in relation to the social services, they were stigmatised and therefore made claims against the so-called ‘whore stigma’ (see also Scaramuzzino & Scaramuzzino 2011). Contrary to the second position, however, they also made claims against what they called the ‘victim stigma’. They argued that individuals who were active in the sex industry often put forward the ideal of being the ‘happy whore’ and that it was taboo to acknowledge being a victim of sexual abuse and being a victim of the sex industry.

In accordance with the positive interpretation of freedom, this last position made a distinction between different levels of the self. The choice to sell sexual services can be interpreted from this position as a choice that was driven by the lower self, resulting, for example, from the experience of being early victims of sexual abuse or having been mistreated. From this position, freedom was defined as a function of which doors individuals were actually able to choose as the State should prevent individuals from making choices that may seem rational but instead lead to exploitation and unhappiness, which is according to the logic behind the abolitionist regime. At the same time, the claims-making against the ‘victim stigma’ could be seen as a claim for freedom in its negative interpretation, in the sense of a protest against having a label imposed, and defending the right to define oneself as a victim and ‘unhappy’.

PRIS, too, had an interest in international activities. They made claims against country policies criminalising sales of sexual services, as in prohibition regimes (e.g. Brants 1998) and argued for an ‘export’ of the Swedish ban on purchase of sexual services to other countries in the EU.

Research argues that the logic behind the abolitionist regime, which PRIS advocated, is to harness governmental power in order to protect individuals who are exploited (Schoular & Sanders 2010). In this sense, the abolitionist regime is a realization of positive freedom. As already discussed in the first position, this regime has sometimes been described as closer to the legalisation regime, and as paradoxically leading to new forms of social control.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Criminalizing the purchase of sexual services and trying to reduce the demand for those services accordingly reflects the goal of also eliminating the selling phenomenon.

8 Conclusions and discussion

The following table summarises the findings of the article and shows the three positions in a more systematic way.

Organisation/ network	A cyber network fighting against the sexual repression of individuals	Rose Alliance National Organisation for sex and erotic workers	PRIS Prostitutes Rights/Revenge In the Society
Speaking for whom	Clients, sex and erotic workers	Sex and erotic workers	Prostitutes
Main argument	The State is repressing individual freedom of expressing sexuality	The sex and erotic worker is stigmatised as a victim and disempowered	The prostitute is stigmatised and not allowed to be a victim
Role of the State	Regulate and engage in licensing, health inspections and harm reduction	Abstain from interference and engage in harm reduction	Prohibit purchasing and support exit from prostitution
Against whom	Radical and State feminists, social democrats and moralists	Radical feminists and the social services	Sex liberals and the social services
Individual self-determination	Freedom to express sexuality	Freedom to sell sexual and erotic services	Freedom from stigma and from selling sexual services
Prostitution defined as	Market (work)	Private relations (sex)	Oppression (violence/coercion)
Prostitution regime	Legalisation	Toleration	Abolition

The analysis of the empirical data shows three quite clear-cut positions, each represented by a collective actor, which resemble, in a quite accurate way, three of the four regimes considered in the theoretical framework.

Such correspondence could be seen as a consequence of the internationalisation and Europeanization that was evident on the Internet. In fact, all positions openly related to other examples of national policies than the Swedish one, to strengthen their claims-making. The critics of the Swedish model, in particular, seem to look to other countries to find alternatives both for different national policies and for social interventions. Furthermore, two of the

collective actors extended their political activities to the international level. Rose Alliance tried to use the EU as a political platform to affect the policy development in Sweden, while PRIS advocated an ‘export’ of the ‘Swedish model’ to other European countries.

It is, however also possible that these regimes are part of what Michel Foucault (1983) would call a ‘discursive regime’ that sets the boundaries for how we can think about a phenomenon at a certain time. Representing different ways of understanding the relation between the State and the individual in prostitution, policies about it and the desired outcome, these regimes become the frame in which almost any proposition in the field can be conceived.

There were no traces of the fourth regime, the prohibitionist one, in the claims-making against the Swedish prostitution policy on the Internet. We did not find any reference to this model and no expression, common in many other countries, of prostitution as being ‘immoral’ from a more conservative perspective.

The more ‘liberal’ claim for the freedom of *expressing sexuality* was expressed from the first position but linked to the claim for the introduction of a legalisation regime that would consider prostitution as part of the market sphere instead of the private relation sphere. Support for the view of prostitution as part of the private relation sphere, and the related toleration regime, we find instead in the second position even though these actors made claims for the freedom of *selling* sexual and erotic services and use the term *sex work*. One possible explanation of these apparent contradictions is that while the first position represents more of a “consumer perspective” on sexual services, the second represents more a “producer perspective” and that such perspectives/positions are connected to different interests, those of sex clients and of sex workers.

Furthermore, the second and the third position, based on different claims, were not only critical of Swedish prostitution policy but also of the Swedish social services. In fact, they claimed that the social services were impeding rather than helping prostitutes and sex and erotic workers towards realising their individual freedom even if this freedom was expressed in opposite ways.

Finally we would like to draw attention to the fact that the collective actors we found seem to have been organised in the ‘shade’. We found only one representative that was not anonymous, and it is impossible to know for sure how many individuals were involved in the different collective actors. Sweden, in this sense, still seems to be a country that does not favour the growth of a strong mobilisation against the national policy on the prostitution issue. Nevertheless, there seems to be some room in the organisational landscape for different actors representing different positions, and possibly groups that have different experiences of being involved in prostitution.

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