

Prostitution as Sex Work in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century: A critical analysis of the 'Swedish model'

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This paper aims to reflect on contemporary conceptions of sex work, and trace the genealogy of the 'Swedish model' to late nineteenth and early twentieth century abolitionist movements across Europe. From there, the paper will analyze the phenomenon of sex work from a labour history perspective, and argue that rather than conceptualizing sex work as the commodification of women, we should understand it as the commodification of labour. The current 'Kvinnofrid' law, also known as the 'Swedish model', is based on the concept that sex work is demand-driven. By criminalizing the client, rather than the sex worker, the aim is to reduce demand for sex workers' services and therefore reduce the number of women offering sexual services. On one hand, this model is feted by abolitionist organisations as a framework which understands sex work as a form of sexual violence perpetrated by men on women's bodies, and that women who sell sex are both victims of patriarchal systems of power and economic necessity. On the other, the pronouncements and actions of Swedish state actors indicate that earlier motivating factors include the protection of the 'community' through the enforcement of certain social norms or standards, and that therefore the model is predicated on the penalisation of sex work, regardless of the impact on the workers, in order to uphold the security and order of the state.

This analysis of sex work will be historicized through examination of the reports of the Swedish situation by the International Abolitionist Foundation, and the works of its founder, Josephine Butler, who protested against state regulation of prostitution used by Sweden until 1919. By using Butler's contemporary publications, and the minutes of chapter meetings as well as international conferences, this presentation will investigate abolitionist understanding of prostitution as economically motivated, and the state response to prostitution as a symptom of patriarchal power. This paper considers the changing nature of the conceptualization of the state in abolitionist discourse, from a power structure perpetuating patriarchy to a tool to protect women from male violence. The abolitionist understanding of the response of the Swedish state in the twentieth century to sex work will be compared to the pronouncement of Swedish state actors through the statements of state employees and lawmakers in terms of their understanding of the purpose of the model, and its effects on Swedish society, and to what extent this has altered over the period- from a system of state regulation to the criminalisation of the purchase of sexual services.

It further considers whether the failure to adequately describe the conditions of the labour market under a capitalist system has historically led to the common misconception that the female sex worker sells her body rather than her labour, which would then call for a radical rethink of 'harm-reduction' strategies based upon the 'Swedish model'.