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Comparative Research Summary: Effects of Sex Buyer Criminalization Laws

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Supplementary Written Evidence

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This briefing synthesizes international research on the effects of sex buyer criminalization (the "Nordic Model") across seven jurisdictions: Canada, Sweden, Northern Ireland, France, the Republic of Ireland, Norway, and Israel. The evidence consistently indicates that while these laws may temporarily reduce visible commercial sex activity, they do not produce lasting reductions and are associated with increased harms to people who sell sex.

KEY FINDINGS BY JURISDICTION

CANADA (LAW INTRODUCED 2014)

Source: Crago, Bruckert, Braschel & Shannon (2022), *Global Public Health* — peer-reviewed quantitative study with 200 sex workers across five cities (Montreal, Toronto, Ottawa, Sudbury, Surrey), conducted in partnership with six sex worker organizations

Methodology: Multivariate logistic regression analysis with purposive sampling of marginalized sex workers (street-based, Indigenous, drug-using populations)

Violence rates comparison to prior criminalization model (n=167 who worked before law change):

- 80% reported violence had increased or stayed the same under the new law
- 87% reported it was harder or the same to get help in an emergency
- More outdoor workers (30%) than indoor workers (12%) reported increased violence
- Reduced ability to screen clients or get identifiable information both for indoor and outdoor worker
- Sex workers who reported an inability to use screening techniques (due to their or their clients' fears of police detection) had over twice the odds of experiencing workplace violence

Impact on Indigenous women:

- Indigenous sex workers reported higher rates of both inability to screen clients and inability to call 911 due to fear of police
- Indigenous women experienced higher workplace violence than non-Indigenous counterparts in both outdoor settings (68% vs 47%) and indoor settings (46% vs 27%)
- The law was ostensibly designed to protect Indigenous women, yet they disproportionately experience both dangerous workplace conditions and workplace violence

Housing and evictions based on sex work:

- The criminalization of facets of sex work under end-demand criminalization generates widespread anti-sex work housing policies
- Sex workers are commonly evicted for their sex work
- Women sex workers have been evicted after police showing up when they were the victim of violence while doing sex work
- Experiencing anti-sex work housing policies or eviction for sex work is associated with twice the odds of experiencing violence in the workplace for sex workers
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Authors' conclusion: The research provides strong empirical evidence that end-demand laws in Canada fuel and foster working and living conditions associated with violence against sex workers, particularly Indigenous sex workers.

SWEDEN (LAW INTRODUCED 1999)

Methodological limitations: No systematic before-and-after research exists. The concurrent rise of internet commerce complicates assessment.

Sources:

1. Charlotta Holmström & May-Len Skilbrei (2017) The Swedish Sex Purchase Act: Where Does it Stand?1. *Oslo Law Review*, 4(2), 82–104.
<https://doi.org/10.18261/issn.2387-3299-2017-02-02>
2. Niina Vuolajärvi (2022) *Criminalising the Sex Buyer: Experiences from the Nordic Region*. LSE Women, Peace and Security.
3. Folkhälsomyndigheten (2019). *Sexuell och reproduktiv hälsa och rättigheter (SRHR) i Sverige 2017. Resultat från befolkningsundersökningen* [Swedish Public Health Agency: Sexual and reproductive health and rights in Sweden 2019. Results from a population survey].
4. Jari Kuosmanen, 'Tio år med lagen. Om förhållningssätt till och erfarenheter av prostitution i Sverige' ['Ten Years with the Act. Regarding the Approach to, and Experiences with, Prostitution in Sweden'] in Charlotta Holmström and May-Len Skilbrei (eds). *Prostitution i Norden* (Nordic Council of Ministers 2008) 357-381
5. Sven-Axel Månsson, 'Den köpta sexualiteten' ['The Bought Sexuality'] in Bo Lewin (ed), *Sex i Sverige – om sexuallivet i Sverige 1996* [Report: Sex in Sweden 1996] (Folkhälsoinstitutet 1998)

Market effects:

- Street-based sex work declined by approximately 50%
- Online escort advertisements increased by over 2,000% (from 304 ads in 2006 to 6,965 in 2014)
- Assessment: Activity appears displaced rather than reduced

Rates of sex buying:

- In Kuosmanen's 2008 study, approximately 8 % of male respondents report having bought sexual services at some time in their life. In Månsson's 1996 survey, 13 % of male respondents report the same. Kuosmanen is cautious about drawing conclusions when comparing these figures, arguing that there may have been underreporting in 2008 when buying sex was criminalised, whereas in 1996 it was not.
- 2019 Swedish Public Health Agency estimate based on population survey: 10–15% of men have purchased sex
- This is comparable to other Nordic countries without full criminalization:
 - Finland: 11–13%

- Norway: 13%
- Denmark: 13%
- No significant difference between criminalizing and non-criminalizing Nordic countries

Public attitudes:

- 80% of women and 50% of men support client criminalization
- Approximately 60% would also support criminalizing selling

Harms reported by sex workers:

- Stigmatization and discrimination in contact with authorities
- Barriers to reporting crimes
- Reduced access to STI testing and health services
- Conditional support from service providers (contingent on exiting)
- Compromised safety practices (clients avoid identification)
- Use of other laws to evict and deport sex workers while doing client and third party investigations (target especially migrant women)

NORTHERN IRELAND (LAW INTRODUCED 2015)

Source: Backus & Nguyen (2021), University of Manchester — one of the few studies providing causal evidence through before-and-after analysis.

Market effects:

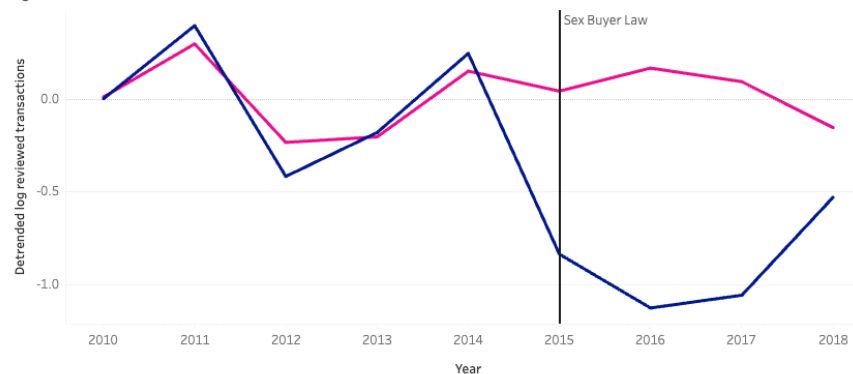
- Initial 53% reduction in online sex work activity
- Market returned to pre-law levels within 18–24 months

Violence:

- 10–22% increase in sexual assaults against women following the law's introduction

The Sex Buyer Law: what can policymakers learn from Northern Ireland?

Figure 1: Reviewed sexual services transaction in Northern Ireland and the counterfactual Northern Ireland.



Key

- Northern Ireland
- Synthetic Northern Ireland

Analysis:

In Figure 1 we show the detrended number of reviewed sexual services transactions over time in Northern Ireland and in the counterfactual Northern Ireland, i.e. what would have happened in Northern Ireland if the Sex Buyer law had not been introduced.

We find a similar pattern for the change in the price of transactions which fell, temporarily, by about 8%. We also find evidence of a decrease in the size of the sex market, and a 20% decrease in the number of police-recorded instances of exploiting-controlling a prostitute, i.e. 'pimping', following the introduction of the Sex Buyer Law.

Taken together, these results indicate that the Sex Buyer Law did affect the market for sexual services via a reduction in demand, though only temporarily. The reason the market recovered might be to do with the difficulty of enforcing the law. As clients learn that the probability they will be caught and prosecuted is very low, they return to the market.



FRANCE (LAW INTRODUCED 2016)

Source: Médecins du Monde survey (583 sex workers surveyed, 70 in-depth interviews)

Reported harms:

- Increase in violence
- Deterioration of living conditions
- Loss of income
- Reduced ability to negotiate condom use
- Deterioration of relations with police
- Exit programmes criticized as inaccessible and conditional on stopping sex work

SINCE THE NEW LEGISLATION ADOPTED ON THE 13TH OF APRIL 2016



88% of sex workers¹ are against the criminalisation of clients



38% of sex workers¹ find it increasingly hard to demand the use of condoms



63% of sex workers¹ have experienced a deterioration of their living conditions

- The law obliges sex workers to work in more isolated places or via internet in order to maintain their livelihoods.

- Sex workers are more regularly confronted with stressful situations which have a negative impact on their physical and psychological health.

- The decreasing number of clients has given remaining clients more power to negotiate unsafe sexual practices.

- The decreasing time available to negotiate with clients has made it harder for sex workers to impose their conditions.



70% of sex workers¹ observe either no improvement or a deterioration of their relations with the police.

- Local municipal bylaws and police identity checks mean that sex workers are still more often criminalised or arrested than their clients.

- Fear of the police is an obstacle to accessing legal protection especially for victims of violence.



78% of sex workers¹ have experienced a loss of income

- The law has impoverished many sex workers, especially those who already in economic difficulty, in particular migrant women working in the street.

- The reduction of the number of clients and increased competition between sex workers has caused prices to fall.



Only **39%** of sex workers¹ are aware of the existence of an "exit-program" and, of those who know of its existence, only 26% intend to apply.

- Although a majority of those asked expressed the desire to change activity, the "exit- program" does not correspond to the needs of most sex workers.

- The restrictive conditions of the exit-program prevent many from applying.

- The large local variations in the implementation of the exit-program and the criteria used to select applicants create territorial inequality for sex workers.



42% of sex workers¹ are more exposed to violence than previous to the law's introduction

- In order to stay hidden, negotiations with clients are reduced to a bare minimum and thereby reduces sex workers' ability to evaluate and select their clients.

- Sex workers are increasingly obliged to accept clients whom they would previously have refused, even if it involves being more exposed to violence.

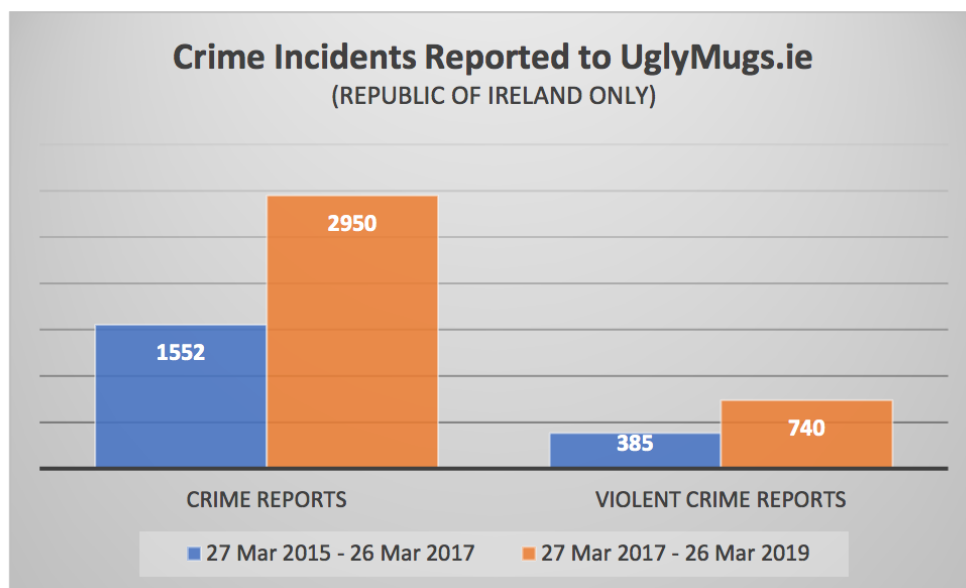
1 - % of the 583 participants in the quantitative survey

THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND (LAW INTRODUCED 2017)

Source: Ugly Mugs, an app where sex workers can report violence.

Increase in violence: Two years after the introduction of criminalizing the buying of sex, self-reported crime towards people who sell sex has almost doubled.

Comparing the two years before and the two years after the new law came in, crime has increased 90% and violent crime specifically has increased 92%.



NORWAY (LAW INTRODUCED 2009)

Sources:

1. Bjørndahl (2012), *Dangerous Liaisons*. A report on the violence women in prostitution in Oslo are exposed to. Oslo. Commissioned by the municipality of Oslo and with support by the Ministry of Justice and Public Safety.
2. Amnesty International (2016) *The Human Cost of 'Crushing' the Market: Criminalization of Sex Work in Norway*
3. Niina Vuolajärvi (2022) *Criminalising the Sex Buyer: Experiences from the Nordic Region*. LSE Women, Peace and Security.

Violence (comparing 2007/08 to 2012):

- Indoor workers reporting violence: increased from 33% to 43%
- Outdoor workers reporting violence: increased from 58% to 76%
- Workers in both settings reporting violence: increased from 68% to 83%

Effect on people who sell sex:

- Forced evictions through "Operation Homeless" (approximately 400 apartments closed by police 2007–2014)
- Sex workers reported violence but faced eviction or deportation after engaging with police
- Reports of violence used by police to facilitate eviction and deportation
- Condoms used as evidence of sex work, creating barriers to sexual health
- Disproportionate targeting of migrant women, particularly Nigerian nationals
- Extensive surveillance and monitoring
- Deportations of sex workers

Police practices ("stress methods"):

- "Preventative policing" aimed at making conditions uncomfortable for sex workers
- Police sources described their approach as seeking to "crush" or "choke" the market
- Working with others for safety (e.g., security, receptionists) criminalized as "promotion"
- Hotels liable for "promotion" if sex work occurs on premises, leading to profiling and exclusion

ISRAEL (LAW INTRODUCED 2020)

Source: Government-commissioned Brookdale Institute study (2024). The study is based on vast data including public attitude surveys, surveys among Israeli men, interviews with people in the sex trade and those who provide services for them and administrative data.

Market effects:

- No reduction in sex buying; rates increased between 2021 and 2024

- Five-year purchasing rates: 12.2% (2024) vs 9.2% (2021)

Public attitudes:

- Approximately 70% support the law (up from 26% in 2008)
- However, only 20% believe it will reduce buyers
- Only 5% expect it to reduce overall levels of sex work

Effect on sex workers and people in the sex trade:

- The law has had a certain impact on the lives of many individuals in prostitution. Some experienced a loss of income, others benefitted from new options for change and for leaving prostitution, partly due to new and expanded services. Moreover, some of the individuals in prostitution reported that the law enhanced their feeling of being protected.

SUMMARY OF EVIDENCE

Outcome	Evidence
Lasting reduction in sex work	Not demonstrated in any jurisdiction
Reduction in sex buying	No significant difference between criminalizing and non-criminalizing countries
Displacement of activity	Consistently observed (street to online)
Violence against sex workers	Increased in Canada, Northern Ireland, Norway, Ireland, and France
Access to health and safety services	Reduced across jurisdictions
Barriers to reporting crime	Documented in Canada, Norway, Sweden, France, Ireland
Forced evictions and housing instability	Documented in Canada, Norway, Sweden
Trafficking reduction	Insufficient comparable data; Canadian study found trafficked individuals faced police harassment
Disproportionate impact on marginalized groups	Indigenous women in Canada; migrant women in Norway and Sweden

CONCLUSION

The international evidence does not support claims that sex buyer criminalization reduces commercial sex activity or improves outcomes for people in the sex trade. The research consistently documents displacement of activity rather than reduction, and increased harms including violence, reduced safety, and barriers to services. Notably, the Canadian study provides the first quantitative evidence demonstrating that the mechanisms through which end-demand laws operate—fear of police detection leading to inability to screen clients or call for emergency help—are independently associated with significantly elevated odds of workplace violence.

The evidence also indicates that marginalized populations—including Indigenous women in Canada and migrant women in Norway and Sweden —experience disproportionate harms under these legal frameworks, despite often being cited as the intended beneficiaries of such laws.

Dr Vuolajärvi is available to respond to any questions the Committee may have regarding this research summary or her own research and the evidence she has presented.