

How to Prevent and Combat Sex Trade in Finland, 15.3.2012

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN,

When we hear the word “prostitution”, we all have our own ideas what the word stands for. Our definition depends also the country and culture where we live in and the language we speak. In this presentation, I define prostitution to cover sex trade in all its forms. It includes “escort services”, selling sex in streets, restaurants and other public places, selling sex on the Internet and so on. As the theme of this part is “Public order and sex trade”, I will handle the topic of my contribution mainly from this specific angle.

It seems that prostitution in streets and restaurants forms only a small part of the whole prostitution scene in Finland. Contacts between buyers and sellers are nowadays made more and more on the Internet. The Public Order Act gives authorisation to the police to interfere in buying sexual services as well as in offering sexual services against payment in public places. In practice, the police find interfering very challenging, especially in respect to gaining evidence. Sex sellers and buyers very seldom directly admit to the police that they have been involved in sex trade action.

Prostitution in streets and restaurants is reported to the police mainly in the Capital area where it is clustered in certain areas and certain restaurants. The main focus in policing, especially in Helsinki, is in prevention of this particular type of prostitution; the police attempt to send off prostitutes working in the streets primarily through advice, requests and orders. They also aim to make clear for both sellers and buyers that prostitution in public places is not acceptable. Also in this kind of policing, the general aim is to expand the attitude against human trafficking. The police inform openly and actively about the monitoring of street prostitution. In 2011, the Helsinki Police Department imposed 37 fines for buying or offering sexual services in a public place. No fines were imposed in any other places in Finland. The main reason for this is that this kind of phenomenon was not reported to the police.

This kind of policing will result in reduction of disturbing or deplorable prostitution in public places, such as restaurants and their surroundings. However, it will neither reduce prostitution as such or its by-products, such as pimping or human trafficking. It will result only in changes in means and areas of operation. In other words, prostitution remains out of sight for “ordinary people”.

Human trafficking issues, such as ways to identify victims of human trafficking are included in basic, advanced and special courses in the Police College curricula. Apart from this, trafficking in human beings is one of the subjects in police seminars concerning the police and immigration. The main aims are that the police could identify victims of human trafficking also in asylum seeking process and when dealing with immigration matters. The police have participated and will participate in international courses and seminars on human trafficking, too. Also information and training about amended legislation are given to police officers nationally and in local police departments.

The police have focused in combating organised crime - including pimping and human trafficking. Unfortunately, resources allocated to the police are limited and will be even more limited in the near future. This means prioritising in police actions. To detect serious crimes, such as human trafficking, and get the abusers in court in order to make them to face legal responsibility for their crimes requires a lot of work, plenty of working hours and also lots of resources. Even if the police was able to identify victims of human trafficking and to steer them to the helping system, gaining evidence against suspects would be difficult.

Especially in the context of monitoring prostitution in streets and restaurants, it is extremely challenging to get proof about pimping, not to mention human trafficking. It is as challenging to identify victims of human trafficking. Sex-workers do not trust the police. (This is easy to understand. Especially foreigners may have very bad experiences of the police in their own country). For them, dealing with the police usually means something negative. If she is foreigner, there is a “danger” of removal on the grounds of selling sex or getting caught red-handed for selling sex in the street could mean imposing a fine.

When a police officer speaks with a sex worker, she quite often claims that she is working alone and that there is nobody forcing her to sell sex. Getting a person speak freely takes lot of time and effort. A positive outcome is usually achieved when the police officer talking with her has gained her personal trust. Getting information directly from sex workers themselves is essential for revealing and detecting abusers and those, who operate at the background of the human trafficking.

It has been suggested that for example buying sexual services should be prohibited as a whole. It has also been a topic of a general discussion. There has been also discussion about prohibiting the sale of sexual services as well.

Today buying sex from a pimped sex worker or from a victim of human trafficking is penalised by our legislation. In Finland we have relatively little information what kind of effect this has had on prostitution or pimping. It would be very interesting to hear what kind of experiences they have got in Sweden. I have understood that there are controversial opinions about effectiveness of the prohibition to buy sex in reducing prostitution and its by-products.

In respect to criminalisation, the aims must be thoroughly thought over. We must consider whether reaching these aims would be possible only by criminalising certain actions. Apart from getting human traffickers in court to face their criminal liabilities, protection and realisation of the sex sellers' human rights must remain as the most important issues in this respect. The legal position of the true victims of the sex trade must be thought over very carefully especially in the light of the human rights. This work must include functional helping and support systems and institutions as well. I think that we will hear more about planned legal amendments concerning the issues I have mentioned later today.

CONCLUSION:

Ladies and gentlemen, to conclude my presentation I would like to stress that preventing and combating human trafficking is very challenging not only for the police, but also for other authorities as well. We need cooperation and coordination between all the stakeholders including NGO's. However, the most important issue is to promote attitude against human trafficking among the public.

We might not get all answers to the questions raised in this seminar, but I hope that we all will get something back from different kind of views and experiences introduced to us here in this seminar.

I would like to thank you all for listening and wish you an interesting seminar day.

Thank you.