

# WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT THE NORDIC MODEL



Media reports often refer to three legislative models with regard to prostitution on which Canada could pattern its new legislation: legalization, prohibition, and the Nordic model. The first two speak for themselves, but most of us are much less familiar with the Nordic model.

## \* WHAT IS THE NORDIC MODEL?

Also known as the Swedish model, the Nordic model is an approach that situates prostitution on a continuum of male violence against women. It is an approach that criminalizes the purchase of sex and pimping but decriminalizes prostituted individuals. This is known as “**asymmetric criminalization**”. In addition to the legislative component, the model includes programs to **prevent** the purchase of sex and **resources** for women who want to exit prostitution. The Nordic model got its name from the fact that the first country to apply it, in 1999, was Sweden, followed in 2009, by Norway and Iceland. It is now being considered in several other European countries, including France, Ireland, England, and Finland.

## \* WHY CHOOSE THE NORDIC MODEL?

The Women’s Coalition to Abolish Prostitution and numerous other Canadian and international groups advocate the adoption of the Nordic model in Canada for a variety of reasons.

- **Because we seek equality between women and men**  
Prostitution is an extremely gender-based practice of inequality, with women accounting for over 90% of prostituted persons and men accounting for over 90% of the buyers.
- **Because we oppose the capitalist vision of a world in which everything can be bought**  
The sex industry is based on social inequalities, notably poverty. Money does not buy consent. It is part of a relationship of domination by one person who pays for sex over another who needs the money to survive.
- **Because we believe in equal opportunity for all women**  
Racism is pervasive in the sex industry, where sales are driven by exoticism, submission, and stereotypes. Racialized women and Aboriginal women are over-represented in the most dehumanizing forms of prostitution such as street prostitution, bestiality, and sado-masochism.
- **Because we don’t believe it’s enough to simply reduce prostitution**  
It isn’t enough to simply reduce sexual exploitation. Harm reduction, when it is applied to prostitution, causes serious damage. It lacks a long-term vision, and often impedes assistance to women trying to exit prostitution and efforts to prevent others from entering the industry.



- **Because we believe in prevention as a remedy for powerlessness**

Prevention, both in terms of the recruitment of women into the industry and the purchase of sex, is an idealistic but realistic solution that has repeatedly proved its effectiveness. Rather than viewing prostitution as inevitable, we need to change mentalities as we have done with rape and domestic violence.

## \* MYTHS AND FACTS

**MYTH: If prostitution was legal it would be easier to combat human trafficking.**

**FACT:** The opposite is true. In countries where prostitution has been legalized, the sex industry has expanded and, to a large degree, has remained hidden because pimps make more money in the illegal trade. Human trafficking is also easier to hide in a country where prostitution is legal.

**MYTH: The Nordic model doesn't help those who are prostituted.**

**FACT:** False. On the contrary, in Sweden, street prostitution has been reduced by half in the 10 years since the model was first applied. There is less sex trafficking in countries that have criminalized the purchase of sex. Women trafficking victims are assisted more quickly and support and resources are made available to women who want to exit the sex industry. Above all, the Nordic

model prevents women from entering into prostitution by changing the social vision of this industry (no, it's not a "job like any other"! ) and discouraging men from paying for sex.

**MYTH: Violence against prostituted women has increased in countries that have adopted the Nordic model.**

**FACT:** False. Male violence against women in prostitution occurs regardless of the laws or whether it takes place outdoors (street) or inside (brothel). All groups, regardless of their position on prostitution, and even the judges of the Supreme Court of Canada recognize that prostitution is dangerous for women. Violence is an integral aspect of prostitution. It is not enough just to diminish the level of violence; we must totally reject the practice. Also, in the countries where the Nordic model has been adopted, women are reporting attackers more often because they are no longer considered to be criminals.

**MYTH: It is unrealistic to think that we can abolish prostitution.**

**FACT:** Not at all! Taking a position in favour of abolishing prostitution or passing abolitionist legislation is not the same as eradicating prostitution. Rape, child sexual abuse, and murder are still committed even though they are prohibited. But a legal prohibition changes attitudes and helps to create a powerful social standard. Prohibiting the purchase of sex conveys a clear message that the human body and sexuality are not commercial goods. This contributes to the building of a truly egalitarian society. /

