

BITCH IN: PYE JAKOBSSON

The so-called “Swedish model” of sex work—legislation that criminalizes the purchasers of sex rather than the sex workers themselves—has been heralded in some progressive circles as the best approach to sex work, with similar legislation adopted in Iceland and Norway. But according to activist and former sex worker Pye Jakobsson, there is no evidence the Swedish model has achieved its aims to reduce sex trafficking or sex work.

Jakobsson is president of the Global Network of Sex Work Projects and has helped establish the International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers in Europe. She is the cofounder of and coordinator at Rose Alliance, a Swedish NGO run by and for current and former sex and erotic workers. The organization provides solidarity and support to people in the sex trade and advocates for the decriminalization of consensual adult sex work. Although she has been fighting for the human rights of sex workers for two decades, Jakobsson feels like she’s spent the past 10 years combating the Swedish model “not out of choice but out of necessity.”

Since it was introduced in 1999, the legislation has increased both danger for women working on the street and stigma against sex workers in general. When the legislation first passed, it appeared that the amount of street sex work initially decreased, though it has now risen again. And while the government claims sex trafficking has decreased, police reports do not reflect this.

In addition, although the Swedish model states people

who sell sex are not criminalized, other laws are still used against them: Landlords are forced to evict if they are informed a sex worker resides in their premises; immigrants selling sex face deportation; mothers face losing custody of their children. This makes the police unsafe to turn to when sex workers are victims of crime. “I am sick of talking about that stigma-enhancing, piece-of-shit law, but as long as Sweden is trying to promote it internationally, I will continue to fight it,” Jakobsson told me.

One of Jakobsson’s main passions has been advocating for sex workers who use drugs. “The double stigma and extreme prejudice toward that group is something I have experience of firsthand.” Jakobsson works as project manager at Hiv-Sverige/HIV-Sweden, and she is also on the advisory board of the Global Coalition on Women and Aids.

Sex workers in Sweden are at an increased risk of HIV and other STDs due to the erroneous belief that harm reduction—such as providing condoms, lubrication, etc. to sex workers—encourages people to sell sex. Given the sex-purchase ban, the government is not interested in providing these services to sex workers.

With the failure of the Swedish model, it is imperative to work toward legislation that abolishes sex trafficking while ensuring sex workers’ rights. Jakobsson believes this will be achieved by the decriminalization of sex work, combined with “a framework based on human and labor rights” and a “clear distinction between sex work and forced labor” in order to address exploitation.

—Ruth Jacobs



PHOTO COURTESY OF PYE JAKOBSSON

PYE JAKOBSSON WANTS YOU TO KNOW ABOUT:

GLOBAL NETWORK OF SEX WORK PROJECTS (nswp.org)

A nonprofit that advocates for rights-based health and social services, freedom from abuse and discrimination, and self-determination for sex workers.

THE INTERNATIONAL NETWORK OF PEOPLE WHO USE DRUGS (inpu.net)

A global network of people who use or have used drugs. INPUD has an evolving regional network structure, as well as strong ties with a number of national and local drug-user organizations. A key role of the organization is to support people who use drugs to access and take part in international policy processes.

GRUPO PORTUGUÊS DE ACTIVISTAS SOBRE TRATAMENTOS DE VIH/SIDA - PEDRO SANTOS (gatportugal.org)

A Portuguese community-based HIV-prevention organization that has operated since the 1980s.

GAY AND LESBIAN ACTIVIST NETWORK FOR GENDER EQUALITY INC. (galangphilippines.org)

A kick-ass organization of lesbians and trans men in Manila. Love them!