

Sweden's Secret Weapon in the Fight Against Sex Trafficking and Why It's So Effective

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Some in the battle against sex trafficking have praised what they call “the Swedish Model” for fighting prostitution and other parts of the illegal trade. A big part of the Swedish Model was to make it illegal to buy sex, but not to sell it.

Per Sunesson, the Swedish Ambassador-at-Large for Combatting Trafficking in Persons, told *CBN News* why Sweden decided to do this and why it's been hugely successful. “Prostitution used to be legal in Sweden and we had a big problem with gender inequality, a big problem with men's violence against women,” Sunesson said. “So we really looked into this issue and the connection to prostitution. There was a lot of violence going on, and allowing men to buy women is not exactly gender equality, right?”

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Criminalize the Buyer, Not the Seller

He said the country definitely decided it had to deal with these problems and launched an investigation in how best to do it.

Seeking solutions, Sunesson said his country asked questions like, “Should we criminalize both the buyer and the seller?” Well, the investigation that was done in Sweden and all the investigations that were done after that showed that most of those who are in prostitution have been sexually abused while they grew up; they come from troubled backgrounds, drug abuse problems and all that. So they are pretty much victims already... a lot of them... most of them.”



“So the government said, ‘No, we're not going to criminalize the one who's selling. We're going to put the shame and the blame on the person who's using the vulnerable person. So we're only criminalizing the purchase of sex,’” Sunesson explained. “And we put provisions in our law that Social Services must provide and offer help to those that are in prostitution.”

At the same time, the government made a big effort to educate police officers, prosecutors and judges about this new way to handle prostitution.

“Real Men Don’t Buy Sex”

It also launched efforts to stigmatize the idea that it was okay for men to pay for sex.

One example of this Sunesson cited: “We had some high-profile sportsmen come out and say ‘real men don’t buy sex’ and stuff like that.”

Before the new law took effect in 1999, the population was split about 50-50 over the idea that just the buying of sex – not the selling of it – should be criminalized. Now, about 85 percent of Swedes back the law.

“And it really changed the mindset of Swedish people,” Sunesson explained. “I’m 54 years old and I would say there are still people my age who think it’s okay to buy sex. But my son, who is 26, in his generation no one would even think the thought to buy sex.”

“So it really lowered the demand for girls and women in prostitution,” he told *CBN News*. “Sweden now is pretty much a dead market for human trafficking for sexual exploitation. We have almost no organized crime regarding that at all.”

In fact, not one violent crime against a prostitute has been reported since the law took effect, according to the ambassador.

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Can “John Schools” Rehabilitate Offenders?

“And if you think about it, you really change the power balance,” Sunesson said. “Because if I were to go out and buy sex in Stockholm today, I would be so afraid that someone would find out. I would lose face. I would lose my job. If I would go to a prostitute and act up, I know she can call the police and I’m the one who’s going to get busted.”

Those caught trying to hire the services of a prostitute face penalties of up to a year in prison. But Sunesson said authorities usually just fine first-time offenders.

Sweden has instituted “john schools,” though, to change the mindset of offenders and rehabilitate them.

“A lot of those who buy sex are married,” Sunesson pointed out. “And I think one way of saving their marriage would be to go to the john school.”

Sweden may have had great success in dealing with human trafficking, but the ambassador warned the problem is growing worse in much of the rest of the world.

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The International Move to Legalize Prostitution

“So many conflicts going on and with the war in Syria and displaced people all over the world has led to a lot of desperate people seeking shelter and desperate to go from one place to another,” Sunesson explained.

“And they connect to human smugglers. If those people don’t have money, the human smugglers team up with the human traffickers and say, ‘Okay, we’ll take you from point A to point B, but we need something. You need to pay, and if you don’t have any money, you have to pay with your own body – prostitute yourself.’”

He said Sweden is worried the problem is only going to grow worse from an international effort to legalize prostitution and brothels.

Sunesson pointed to a country not all that far from Sweden: Germany.

“They have legal brothels and more than 400,000 girls in prostitution. They have 1.26 million purchases per 24 hours,” Sunesson stated. “And 98 percent of those who are working at the brothels in Germany are girls from Romania, Macedonia, Bulgaria and other developing countries.”

“And that’s always the picture, wherever you go in the world,” he noted. “It’s always the most vulnerable who end up serving at brothels and in prostitution.” MF