

Abolishing Prostitution: The Swedish Solution An Interview with Gunilla Ekberg by the Rain and Thunder Collective

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Gunilla Ekberg is a long-time radical feminist activist and lawyer. She is a former special advisor on issues regarding prostitution and trafficking in women and children to the Swedish government. She is currently the Co-Executive Director of the non-governmental international organization Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, which works to combat sexual exploitation of women and children in all its forms.

R&T: If you could start by giving a little background on your work against prostitution and trafficking, particularly your experience as a special advisor on issues regarding prostitution and trafficking for the Swedish government?

Gunilla Ekberg (GE): My whole life has been about ending male violence against women. In 2001, I was asked by the Swedish Deputy Prime Minister Margareta Winberg to come to Sweden to create and implement a program on prostitution and trafficking in human beings, starting with a Nordic Baltic Campaign Against Trafficking in Women in 2002, during which I coordinated activities in the eight countries. I was given a lot of possibilities to implement quite radical feminist policies, thanks to the women who I worked with – the Deputy Prime Minister, the State Secretary, Lise Bergh, and Marianne Laxén, who was the Director for the Division on Gender Equality in the government. They were very supportive. In fact, the Swedish government at the time made the work to prevent and combat prostitution and trafficking one of their most important political priorities.

R&T: That's remarkable and seems to be a testament to the Swedish women's movement during that time.

GE: Change came through the Swedish women's movement. During that time, there were some violent crimes against women in prostitution. One prostituted woman, Catrine da Costa, was murdered.

R&T: Did that prompt action?

GE: Yes. And then with the 1994 elections, the number of women in the Parliament increased from 27% to 45% women. And we got a Labour/Left majority government. Of course when you have 45% women in the parliament, they start talking about male violence against women. The women's movement and the battered women's association lobbied the Labour Party Women's Association about issues of male violence against women, including prostitution. They then had a discussion within the Labour Party and decided to make the work against male violence against women a government priority. That's logical. On the contrary in countries where there are so few women in public office like in the U.S, violence against women is rarely discussed, or if it is discussed, the need to implement necessary policies and measures is not taken seriously.

We should also keep in mind that there wasn't -- and there still isn't -- a particularly large prostitution lobby in Sweden. Today, there are a number of academics -- two or three of them -- who are

promoting a post-modernist, neo-liberalist analysis of prostitution. They're there, but not as visible in the public debate as they would like to be, and definitely not to the same degree or extent as in other countries.

The establishment of comprehensive social welfare policies in Sweden over 50 years was pivotal as was the understanding that you have to take into consideration the impact of power differences when you address social problems. Generally, I would argue that there is generally a greater understanding of power structures in Swedish society. But of course we had to fight on all levels. We also had a lot of media attention and coverage on the subject. There were lots of writings and conferences.

In many situations, political change comes from the struggle by a large group, but you also need people in power who are willing to push for change. Margareta Winberg, who at the time was the leader of the Labour Party Women's Association, decided that she would take it on. The 1998 government Bill on Violence Against Women included an analysis of prostitution as violence against women. This is an important cultural shift of consciousness away from a culture of prostitution. The cultural shift in Sweden was that we went from seeing prostitution as separate from other forms of male violence to naming it as a serious form of male sexual violence against women. And if prostitution is male violence against women, then it is a crime and consequently, there is a perpetrator. So, we need to focus on all the perpetrators in the debate on prostitution, not just the traffickers or the pimps, but the immediate perpetrator – the man who commits the prostitution act on the prostituted woman who is no different than a rapist.

R&T: How do you think we can create a cultural shift like that in countries like the U.S. where the culture of prostitution is so deeply embedded?

GE: Well, this culture is deeply embedded in most countries. Sweden was in many respects no different than the U.S. When we say the magic word, let's look at the demand -- the men who purchase and exploit women -- it's as if suddenly a light goes on for many. An example is when we carried out the Nordic Baltic Campaign Against Trafficking in Women. That campaign was a government campaign which is, in itself, a very unusual initiative. Governments came together and said, "We're going to do awareness-raising on trafficking of human beings" and agreed that this campaign was to focus on men's demand for women in prostitution -- something that had never really been talked about before. Sweden had a law since 1999 (See Fact Box), all the other countries didn't. In the three Baltic countries there were legislative proposals to legalize the prostitution industry.

The campaign took place in that context. We worked with women's groups and with governments and public authorities. We used as a point of departure the United Nations Protocol, Article 9.5, which says that every country which has signed and ratified this convention has to enact legal and other measures to discourage the demand. Each country then had to enact policy and awareness-raising measures to counteract the demand. It could be awareness-raising. It could be all kinds of things. But we wanted to make the men who sexually exploit women and girls through prostitution accountable and visible.

Some countries were more reluctant than others to do so because they had a policy of prostitution that was more about tolerating the industry. However, they still agreed that such a campaign was necessary and important. This was the first time ever in the world that such a campaign was carried out. And because of this campaign, women's groups and parliamentarians and some female ministers in the Baltic countries fought to get rid of the legislative proposals to legalize the prostitution industry – and succeeded!. In Sweden, for example, we did an educational campaign in high schools with 15 to 18 year olds. We reached over 65,000 students. We organized day-long educational forums and discussions, with a screening of the film *Lilya-4-Ever.* (See Fact Box.) We distributed an excellent book with articles on gender equality, against prostitution, against pornography, on the sexualization of women and girls in public space, etc. We did have lots of discussions about how boys treat girls (e.g. on how unacceptable it is to call girls or women demeaning names, to sexually harass girls, etc). We worked with kids who wrote some of the texts in the book. We talked about how many young men and boys get their sexual education through internet pornography sites and how this is detrimental to their attitudes towards women and girls. We also talked with girls about how they can refuse to deal with boys. It was really good. But, of course, to have real impact you can't just do this education once. You have to do it repeatedly to impact new

generations.

Part of my tasks was also to “export” the Swedish anti-prostitution strategies – that is to influence legislators and women’s groups in other countries to campaign for similar laws. And we saw huge changes. For example, South Korea, South Africa, Norway and other countries have enacted the same legislation that criminalizes the buyer.

R&T: Would you talk about some of the main principles behind the Swedish law on prostitution?

GE: One of the first principles is that if you’re trying to create a modern democratic society where gender equality is the norm and where all men and women should have similar rights and responsibilities, then you cannot legalize prostitution. In Sweden, it is understood that any society that claims to defend principles of legal, political, economic, and social equality for women and girls must reject the idea that women and children, mostly girls, are commodities that can be bought, sold, and sexually exploited by men. To do otherwise is to allow that a separate class of female human beings, especially women and girls who are economically and racially marginalized, is excluded from these measures.

Let me give you an example. At one of the international seminars we organized in a country with a legalized prostitution industry, there were a couple of men in the audience who were sitting right in front of me pretending to be listening to my lecture. When the seminar was over they crossed the street and went into a brothel. Now if they had come up to me and touched my breasts or said something abusive or offensive to me, I could’ve resorted to all of those measures that we have fought for – for example, sexual harassment legislation. But instead they crossed the street, paid 50 euros to the receptionist in the brothel and did these same things to a woman designated as a “sex worker.” Obviously none of the measures apply to her. She cannot claim that she has been sexually harassed or that she has been raped. She can’t claim that she has been battered by these men. She has absolutely no rights.

Therefore, we have to ensure that all women are included in what we fight for. Liberation is not just for some of us. We must have a political vision that that all women and girls should be able to live without any forms of violence committed against them by men, and then work for measures based on this political vision are implemented. And so that’s one principle.

The other principle is that women in prostitution shouldn’t be criminalized - because they are victims of male violence. Rather, it is the perpetrators — the pimps, traffickers, and prostitution buyers — who should be criminalized. In Sweden, prostituted women and children are seen as victims of male violence who do not risk legal or other penalties. Instead, they have a right to assistance to escape prostitution. Another principle was that Sweden and its representatives were to oppose any measures to legalize or decriminalize the prostitution industry internationally.

R&T: Yet people still cling onto the “choice” ideology, that women “choose” prostitution. How do you respond to this?

GE: I actually don’t think it’s that difficult. First of all, I will never convince those who are firmly pro-prostitution, but I also have no intention to do so. It doesn’t interest me particularly because it’s useless. What interests me is to raise the consciousness of those who have an open mind. That’s where the change is going to come from. The change is not going to come from those who are pro-prostitution. Most of them will never change their minds. We need to focus our awareness raising, consciousness-raising efforts, for those who are willing to question patriarchal beliefs.

When people talk about choice, the issues become very individualized and that’s what really troubles me. If we start talking about Mary who’s in prostitution and calls herself a “sex worker” and we don’t talk about power structures, it’s a problem. It’s a problem when we just talk about the individual woman and not about patriarchy and about those who benefit and profit off of selling, buying and exploiting women in prostitution.

Neo-liberalism is an individualist ideology and neo-liberalism lacks an analysis of male power. Another important part of our principles was that anything we do on male violence against women has to have an analysis of differences of power between men and women. So if you have a feminist analysis, you ask yourself, “Who does this benefit?”

You have to talk about the historical power differences between men and women which lead to men oppressing women and putting women and girls in a subordinate position. If you don't have that analysis, you will never understand prostitution. Those who are pro-prostitution of course ignore power differences between men and women. They boil prostitution down to individual choice. If you analyze choice you recognize that choice is only possible if you choose from equal alternatives. You have to distinguish between making a decision and having a genuine choice. We make decisions in all kinds of situations that are difficult because that's part of everyday life. If I'm in a job I absolutely loathe, that pays badly, I may have to stay there. So I make a decision to stay there because I can't get another job right now. That is not to have a real choice. We're not talking about choosing between different brands of a consumer product. We're talking about a situation of male domination where there are different forms of oppression that are keeping women down. Can you make a genuine choice if you're living in poverty? No, probably not in a context where you have different oppressive conditions to contend with. I'm not saying that all women living in poverty end up in prostitution, but many of the women in prostitution come from a poor background so you have to think about it that way.

Pimps, traffickers, and buyers as sex tourists go to countries where women exist in oppressive social, political, legal and economic contexts or where there have been armed conflicts or natural catastrophes or where the political system and society is not working for women to recruit and purchase women and girls into the prostitution industry. And when you look at prostitution/trafficking within countries, it's the same thing. Men exploit the fact that women are marginalized/oppressed for different reasons e.g.. their victims may be girls who've run away from home because they're being raped by their fathers or other male relatives, or women who are vulnerable due to drug use, leaving battering husbands etc.

R&T: Would you talk about the positive changes that have come about since the Swedish model was implemented?

GE: In January 2009, it's time to break out the champagne! Then it has been ten years since the law came into force in Sweden. It is also the first day of the coming into force of the Norwegian law. For me, personally, I cried when the law was passed by the parliament in Norway. So much hard work. We all really felt like we had made enormous political change that day.

When the Swedish law was put into place, two monitoring mechanisms were created. One is the National Board of Health and Welfare which is tasked with following the situation of prostitution in Sweden. The other one is the National Rapporteur on Trafficking in Human Beings, Kajsa Wahlberg, who publishes annual reports on the situation concerning prostitution and trafficking of human beings within and into Sweden. But internationally the pro-prostitution lobby tends to ignore these reports because they do not want to hear the facts and figures that show that our strategies are working. Instead, they have created myths that the law doesn't work. They claim prostitution activities go underground, that there's more violence against women in prostitution, or that men travel to other countries due to our law. These are the three most common myths. We know of course that none of these are true.

First of all, immediately when the law came into force almost all the buyers disappeared from street prostitution. Obviously, because they didn't want to be arrested. Before the law existed, in 1996, research interviews with Swedish men about their experiences purchasing somebody for prostitution purposes were conducted. 13.6% of Swedish men over 18 had bought somebody once or more for prostitution purposes. In mid-November 2008 when a new research study was published, the number of purchasers or buyers was down to 8%. This is a good and trust worthy study -- solid, strong, and empirical.

We know that the number of individuals in prostitution has gone down considerably and that Sweden has the lowest number of victims of trafficking in human beings in the European Union. This is because the law functions as an effective barrier to the establishment of traffickers in Sweden. Sweden is no longer an attractive market. And the reason why Sweden is no longer an attractive market is because we targeted the demand, the men, by passing this law. The human traffickers are all about making profit. If you take away their profit, they will go elsewhere. So the best solution is to pass a law.

We know from Swedish police investigations into trafficking and procuring networks – both across border and national – that pimps in the Baltic countries are steering clear of Sweden. We have extensive

phone-tapping evidence. For example, a pimp said he wanted to bring 15 young Estonian women to Stockholm for a couple of weeks to make money and the Swedish intermediaries said, "Don't do that. It's too expensive for you. Bring the women to Norway or Denmark or even better, Germany or Holland." Because that's where the markets are.

The Swedish law functions as a trade barrier -- if you want to use economic language. We made it more difficult for pimps to sell women as commodities in Sweden. In order to sell the commodities, the salespersons, the pimps, need to get in contact with the buyers. And the buyers are nervous about being arrested. There is a special internet department of the National Police that just focuses on prostitution, trafficking and pornography. Buyers think that doing things on the internet makes you invisible when the exact opposite is true. It is easy to track down the buyers' attempts to contact the pimps. We now have a court decision that allows as evidence in court email correspondence between buyer and pimp. This is a real step in the right direction.

You need also to educate the police to understand the underlying principles, not just how to implement the law. They need to understand that it is the buyers who are the criminals, not the women in prostitution. Before the law came into force, the police were highly critical. The prosecutors were highly critical. They said the law wasn't going to work. We don't like this. We don't want it. So we had to educate them.

We can also see important normative changes as a result of the law -- something that was another aim of this legislation. Get people to start thinking, "In Sweden, no one is going to be for sale and no one can purchase another person." Polls have been carried out regularly about the public support of the law which consistently has been between 70 and 79%. People support the law so that means the public educational part of it is working.

The police commissioner of Stockholm was especially critical of the law. However, when he retired, he made a point of going to the papers to say that he had been wrong and that the law was, in fact, working. And the reason why he concluded that it was working was because the police could use the buyers to find the pimps.

The buyers are prosecuted in the same trial as the pimps and traffickers, which means that, first of all, it alleviates some of the burden off the shoulder of the victim. In most procuring and trafficking cases in other countries, the conclusive evidence mostly comes from the stories the victims tell. Obviously, women rarely want to talk about the details of the violence committed against them. So when it comes to establishing who are the pimps and traffickers, the buyers are also cross-examined. In this way, you get some of the information that the women don't have because the women often don't know how the men get in contact with the pimps.

There is also a pedagogical advantage to prosecuting the buyers in the same trial. Suddenly they are on trial together with the established organized crime network. The police and prosecutors are making it really clear to the buyers that they are intimately connected with organized crime; something that makes most of them really uncomfortable. Some don't care, but the majority does.

Again, you can see the normative effects of the law. What happens when you put the law into place is that there are a lot of buyers that stop their exploitative behavior and don't continue to buy women in prostitution and those are the men we call the occasional buyers. Those men disappeared almost immediately because it was too risky. What we know is that about 3% — and that number can differ a little bit between countries — of the buyers are hard core. They will go to any lengths to buy somebody and sexually exploit her or him. But you do get rid of the majority of the buyers when the law is implemented. They may buy prostituted women when they travel, but even that is shifting now because we can see the norms changing. A small study was carried out during the World Soccer Games in Germany in 2006. Researchers interviewed men from different countries about their intention to buy women in prostitution. The study shows that Swedish men consistently claimed that they wouldn't. This may or may not be true, but at least they had a change in attitude.

R&T: Do you have suggestions or input to give to activists organizing against prostitution and trafficking?

GE: Any political measure that you try to push for – whether it’s a law or policy, you have to have a political vision, which means that you have to discuss what is the goal you want to reach – or what kind of society do you want to live in?. Yes, we want to abolish prostitution, and we want to do it NOW so how do we get there? First you think about what goal you have and then you think about the measures that will take you there. In many countries all they do is scattered measures with no clear goal in mind. And politics is about setting the road for where we’re heading.

We know that we’re probably not going to be able to abolish prostitution completely in Sweden in my lifetime, but we do have a political vision of working towards that direction, towards abolition. This is in stark contrast to the political vision of those who are pro-prostitution, whose vision is limited to stating that prostitution is work; that it’s the oldest profession in the world; that men will never stop buying women because they need access to women sexually whenever they want to; because it’s sexual liberation for women and who am I to tell others what to do – anyway!. If you have that kind of idea about reality, your political vision is sorely limited to reducing the harm of prostitution. This is really problematic because they try to fix things for women in prostitution within an inherently oppressive system, whereas if you have a feminist point of view, the goal is that all women and girls should live lives without being violated, whatever the form of male violence, which requires radical measures!.

We need to speak loudly about what it is we want to do and not compromise about our goals. We want to abolish prostitution. We don’t want women and girls, or boys for that matter, to be victims of prostitution and trafficking in human beings. And to be successful, we have to talk about the men who are the perpetrators. They are the ones that have to be held accountable, to take responsibility for their behavior and stop buying and sexually exploiting women and girls. That’s not women’s job. Men have to do it and they have to be held accountable if they don’t.

We know from research on the demand in Sweden, and for example in Scotland and in Chicago, that men themselves identify three measures that would make them stop buying somebody for prostitution purposes. One is having their name and photo posted on a public billboard. Another is to be placed on a sexual offenders register. But the most important deterrent, they say, is legislation that penalizes the buying of a sexual act.

Educate yourself about prostitution and start discussing with friends and other activists. In their hearts, most women know very well that prostitution is harmful. Women know, but they don’t have words to describe why. They don’t have the arguments to go up against those who are pro-prostitution. If the lobbyists say that prostitution is work, they don’t have the analysis or words to say why it’s not. So get good at understanding what prostitution is, its individual and structural effects, and develop your arguments!

I always provide three questions to those I teach for them to understand that prostitution is male violence. The first question is: (1) Who are the women who are used in prostitution? We have already talked about this. The second question is: (2) What do men do to women in prostitution? The pro-prostitution lobby will never answer the second question. They talk about how it’s dangerous to be prostituted on street corners because you risk being murdered, and how much better women will fare in legal brothels, but they never talk about the actual prostitution act that the buyers do to the women: the penetration, the touching, the humiliation. And this is the same wherever women are being prostituted. If they would talk about the prostitution act and understand profoundly the harm of prostitution, their whole analytic context would fall apart. It’s easy to talk about health standards and gynecological exams, but when we talk about the actual prostitution act, they can’t handle that and have no arguments.

The third question is: (3) What are the effects of prostitution on the women in prostitution as well as society at large? Prostitution doesn’t just have individual impacts on women in prostitution. It impacts all women in that society. If you have a country that thinks it’s appropriate and acceptable that women are to be for sale then you normalize the idea that men have the right to buy and sexually exploit not just a particularly marginalized subclass of women, but all of us.

It’s important for all of us to understand prostitution and to have a political vision that prostitution can be abolished. We have to talk about and act against the buyers and perpetrators, at the same time we figure out how we can assist women get out of prostitution. And this will make a difference.