

# What do Swedish Students Think About the Sale of Sexual Services?

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The Swedish Sex Purchase Act came into force on 1 of January 1999, making Sweden the first country in Europe, maybe even in the world, to criminalize the purchase, but not the sale of sexual services.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the “Swedish model” has become famous around the world. Some countries, for instance France and Norway, have followed suit. Other countries have decided to take a more liberal stand, through decriminalization or legalization, notably Germany<sup>2</sup> and New Zealand.<sup>3</sup> In Sweden several surveys have been conducted to examine the public’s attitude to the sale of sexual services.<sup>4</sup> But what does the sub-set ‘students’ think about the sale of sexual services? Are

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<sup>1</sup> Dodillet, Susanne. *Är sex arbete?: svensk och tysk prostitutionspolitik sedan 1970-talet*, Vertigo, Diss. Gothenburg: University of Gothenburg, 2009, s. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Seals, Maryann. “Worker Rights and Health Protection for Prostitutes: A Comparison of the Netherlands, Germany, and Nevada”, *Healthcare for Women International*, vol. 36, nr. 7, 784–796, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Farley, Melissa. “What Really Happened in New Zealand After Prostitution was Decriminalized in 2003?” *Prostitution Research & Education*, San Francisco, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Månsson, Sven-Axel 1996; Olsson, Niclas 2007, 2010; Kuosmanen, Jari 2008; Priebe, Gisela & Svedin, Carl Göran 2012.

the attitudes of students in line with the rest of the population? What do they think of the sex purchase law, decriminalization, stigmatization, the free choice of individuals and seeing sexual services as salaried employment? And do attitudes differ if the seller of sexual services is a man or a woman?

This study has two aims: (1) to increase the knowledge about the attitudes of students towards the sale of sexual services, (2) to test the hypothesis that the societal context of Swedish students, i.e. the Swedish sex purchase law, exerts a stronger influence on their attitudes than the global trend of more liberal attitudes towards the sale of sexual services.

An survey in the form of an online questionnaire was conducted at Lund university in the spring of 2018. The number of respondents was 100, 95 of which stated that they were current students at Lund University. 65% identified as women, 32 % as men, and 2 % as “other”. Respondents were anonymous from the beginning. In this article, the results of the survey will be presented and analysed and the hypothesis will be discussed. The results of the study are then related to sociologist Ronald Weitzer’s theoretical framework of three competing paradigms: *the empowerment paradigm, the oppression paradigm and the polymorphous paradigm*.<sup>5</sup>

Those who advocate that sexual services should be regarded as a salaried employment are placed in the empowerment paradigm, where the self-determination of the individual and agency are highly valued. Others believe that the acceptance of the sale of sexual services as a salaried employment only legitimizes human trafficking, where women are especially vulnerable. The proponents of this line of argument belong to the oppression paradigm, which is grounded in radical feminism and the understanding that the sale of sexual services is an expression of a patriarchal order based on gender inequality.<sup>6</sup> Those who do not fit into these two categories would, according to Weitzer, be placed in the polymorphous paradigm. The core of this paradigm is to

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<sup>5</sup> Weitzer, Ronald John. *Legalizing Prostitution: From Illicit Vice to Lawful Business*, New York University Press, New York, 2012.

<sup>6</sup> Ekis Ekman, Kajsa. *Varat och varan: prostitution, surrogatmödraskap och den delade människan*. Leopard Förlag, Stockholm, p. 7.

identify a combination of different factors: the experience of the individual, geographical locations and different types of arrangements, which creates a more complex view of the situation.

## **What attitudes do the students have towards the sale of sexual services?**

The results from the survey show that about half the students feel that they have a good knowledge about the sex purchase law, and a majority believes Sweden should keep it. Even though the support for the law is strong, less than half believes that it has led to a decrease in the sales of sexual services. Regarding the law system, the students do not believe that the sale of sexual services should be criminalized, nor that the purchase of sexual services should be decriminalized. They think that the sale of sexual services is a stigmatized business, and they do not think that the stigmatization would decrease if the purchase of sexual services would be legalized.

A minority of the students think it is up to every individual if they want to sell sexual services and believe that those who sell sexual services do so out of their own free will. Some think that the sale of sexual services should be seen as a salaried employment and believe that this would enhance the status of those selling sexual services. Most of the students do not believe that there is any major difference between women or men selling sexual services. However, in the word association part of the questionnaire, female sex sellers were associated with words such as *non-independent*, *limited*, *victim* and *pimp involved* while male sex sellers were associated with words such as *independent*, *agent* and *pimp not involved* – a result that reveals that the students have different views depending on whether it is a woman or a man who is selling the sexual services.

The gendered differences among the students show that a majority of the female students have stronger opinions about maintaining the sex purchase law, prohibiting the sale of sexual services and continuing to criminalize those who purchase sexual services. They do not believe that the stigma of selling

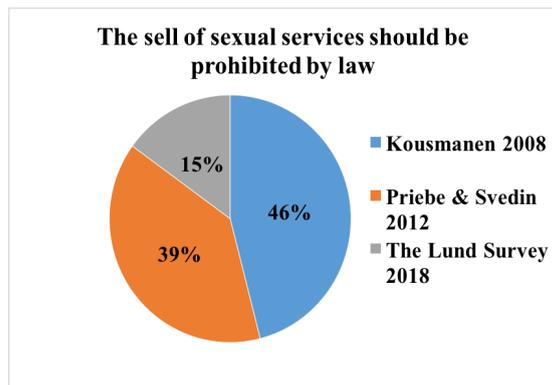
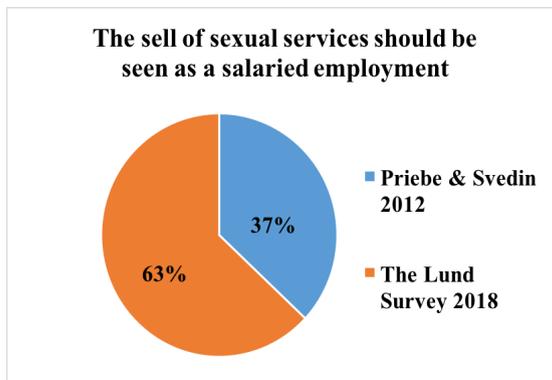
sexual services will decrease if the buyer is decriminalized and they do not believe that selling sexual services is done voluntarily. A majority of the male students have stronger opinions about not prohibiting the sale of sexual services and believe that there is a stigmatization of the sale of sexual services. They believe that it is up to the individual to sell sexual services, that the sale of sexual services shall be regarded as a salaried employment and that there is no difference between women and men selling sexual services.

The survey reveals a difference in attitudes between the students at the different faculties of the university. The faculties will be placed on a “liberal” scale, where attitudes will be judged as liberal or not. In this context “liberal” is defined as having positive attitudes towards a legalization or decriminalization regarding the sale and purchase of sexual services. The students at the Faculty of Social Sciences are most liberal since they are least positive towards the sex purchase law, most positive to decriminalize the purchasing of sexual services, thinks that the sale of sexual services shall be regarded as a salaried employment and that there is no major difference between women and men selling sexual services.

The least liberal ones are the students at the Faculty of Humanities and Theology, where a strong support for the sex purchase law is found. They are least positive to decriminalizing the purchase of sexual services and least likely to accept the sale of sexual services as a salaried employment. Even though they are least likely to have a liberal view, they are the group that primarily considers that it is up to every individual to decide if they want to sell sexual services. The students at the Faculty of Law and at the Faculty of Engineering varied in their answers, which makes them more difficult to place on a “liberal view scale”. The result indicates that there is a difference between the students at the different faculties. However, it is difficult to draw a conclusion from the survey as to what the correlation between attitudes towards the sale of sexual services and faculty affiliation might be.

A comparison between the Lund survey and previous attitude surveys shows that the students are more concerned with keeping the sex purchase law, their confidence in the sex purchase law is higher and the resistance to

criminalizing the seller of sexual services is greater than in previous surveys. Although the majority of the respondents consider that the sale of sexual services should not be regarded as salaried employment, the students are still more positive to this than the overall population is. In other words, the attitudes of the students towards the sale of sexual services are not in line with the attitudes of the overall population.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>7</sup> Kuosmanen, 2008, p. 367; Priebe and Svedin, 2012, p. 25.

## The students support the oppression paradigm, or do they object?

Analysing the results of the Lund survey, the *oppression paradigm* seems the best fit for understanding the reasoning of the respondents. The confidence in the sex purchase law is strong among the students and in the oppression paradigm it is argued that the legalization of sex purchases will not improve the situation for those involved in selling sexual services. Within the oppression paradigm, the sale of sexual services is not considered to be done out of free will. This opinion is also strong among the students, where only a minority believes that it is up to the individual to decide whether to sell sexual services or not. In the oppression paradigm sexual services are not considered salaried employment, and similarly only a minority of students believe that they should be regarded as such.

Although the result of the questionnaire places the students in the *oppression paradigm*, one cannot conclude that they agree with everything that scholars or other oppression paradigm-proponents argue for. The result shows a less hard-track approach to the sale of sexual services, which is not surprising as it is a complex subject. In the survey, there are interesting differences between the *hard and soft results*. The *hard results* are drawn from the Likert scale answers,<sup>8</sup> where the students agreed or opposed different statements. The *soft results* are drawn from five questions with an open answer option, where the students were free to articulate their opinions. After analysing the soft results and the results from the word association, it was less obvious that the respondents should be placed in the oppression paradigm. These answers give a more complex picture of the situation where both the *empowerment paradigm* and the *polymorphous paradigm* are relevant.

Regarding the question if it is up to every individual to decide whether to sell sexual services, the hard answers shows that the students do not think it is up to the individual to determine this. Among the soft answers, however,

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<sup>8</sup> The Likert-scale is a widely used instrument for measuring positive and negative attitudes among respondents to questionnaires.

several respondents argue for “the right to self-determination” and “my body, my rights”. According to Weitzer, this approach fits better into the *empowerment paradigm* than in the *oppression paradigm*.<sup>9</sup> Some respondents comment that it is difficult to provide a straightforward answer. One respondent stated (my translation from Swedish):

In theory, there is nothing wrong with agreeing to exchange sex and money – if all parties agree and respect each other as human beings [...]. I do not think and believe, however, that it is a significant part of those who “choose” to sell sex, who actually want to do so. I think there are prevailing circumstances, everything from compulsion to self-harm behaviour, that bring about the decision.

The respondent demonstrates the intersection between the free will and the oppression that forces people into the sale of sexual services. The way in which the respondent points out the complexity of the question – context, structure and circumstance – positions the statement in the *polymorphous paradigm*.<sup>10</sup> Other respondents consider that the right of self-determination to sell sexual services is dependent on the situation. One respondent argues as follows (my translation from Swedish):

It depends on whether it is a last resort (i.e. barely voluntary) or someone who does not want to take a student loan. The first is more understandable, even if it kind of happens in a time of need. Society should instead ensure that people do not end up in such situations, but it is easier said than done.

The respondent argues that it depends on the situation if a person may choose to sell sexual services or not. Also, it should be up to the individual to choose whether to sell sexual services or not if it is the last resort, but not up to the

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<sup>9</sup> Weitzer, 2012. p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> Weitzer, 2012. p. 16.

individual if it is not necessary for a functioning working life. A difficulty with this approach is to determine where the limit for “barely voluntary” is, and what kind of situations can legitimize the sale of sexual services. In addition, one cannot assume that everyone who sells sexual services has the same motive – an approach that belongs in the *polymorphous paradigm*.<sup>11</sup>

The question regarding whether sexual services should be seen as a salaried employment also yields varied responses. Here the argument is, once again, that it depends on the situation. The present situation, where the sale of sexual services is widespread, is the starting point for some of the respondents’ argumentation. They say that the present situation is something that they have to take into account, so-called harm reduction. One respondent states (my translation from Swedish)

[...] as widespread as prostitution is and always have been, and is likely to continue to be, it may be better to find solutions based on the present situation. And then I think, for example, union rights would bring something positive. If we cannot change the situation, then we unfortunately have to adapt to it and design the best possible conditions based on it.

This argument appeared multiple times among the soft answers, which would place many of the students in the *polymorphous paradigm*.

The response that positions the students furthest away from the *oppressive paradigm* in the hard answers category is the question of whether there is any difference between women and men who sell sexual services. The responses show that the students do not believe that there is a difference between the sexes. In their opinion neither the reason why individuals sell sexual services nor the arenas that are used for the sale of sexual services are dependent on gender. This position belongs to the *empowerment paradigm*.<sup>12</sup> Interestingly the soft answers point to an understanding of the

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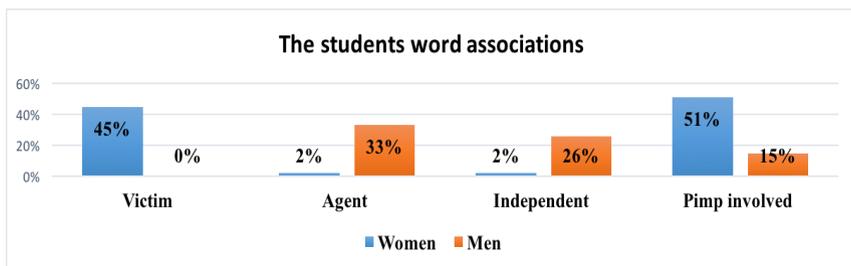
<sup>11</sup> Weitzer, 2012. p. 18.

<sup>12</sup> Dodillet, 2009. p. 309.

issue that belongs to the opposite camp, the *oppressive paradigm*. In the soft answers the respondents convey a belief in a difference between the sexes. Words like “patriarchy”, “female sexualization”, and “female objectification” pop up several times, views that constitute the foundation of the *oppression paradigm*.<sup>13</sup> One respondent replies (my translation from Swedish):

In my view, it is obvious that there is a difference, when society is designed to stigmatize women more, which in turn results in different reasons for women and men to sell sexual services. In an equal world where men and women were seen exactly the same, I would not agree.

The answers to the word associations also create a different picture of the attitudes of the students towards women and men who sell sexual services. The table below shows that depending on the gender of the person who sells sex, the students associate the words victim, actor, independent and pimp involved differently. In other words, there is an understanding among the students that there is a difference between women and men selling sex. For example, females who sell sex are seen as non-independent individuals without agency. Their situation is seen as permanent and they are limited to a particular geographical location, and the students also believe there is a pimp involved.



<sup>13</sup> Weitzer, 2012. p. 10.

Although the results of the questionnaire's *hard responses* show that the students at Lund University primarily are placed in the *oppressive paradigm*, the *soft responses* of the survey, together with the *word associations*, create a new dimension. In this dimension the *empowerment paradigm* and the *polymorphous paradigm* receive considerable support. Which paradigm that dominates among students at Lund University will thus differ depending on which part of the survey that is considered. By placing the results of the Lund survey in Weitzer's theory of the three competing paradigms, a better understanding of the difficulty to categorize people's opinions are achieved.

Rather than the paradigms helping to explain the attitudes of the students towards the sale of sexual services, a deeper understanding is gained concerning the complexity of the questions posed. Weitzer's starting point is that there are three different approaches to the sale of sexual services on which the paradigms are based. However, the difficulty encountered in positioning the attitudes of the students in a single paradigm shows that the paradigms perhaps are not mutually exclusive but rather complement each other in many ways. The opinions cannot be distinguished in the way Weitzer argues, instead many opinions overlap.

## Confirming or disproving the hypothesis

This research aimed to test the hypothesis that the societal context of Swedish students, i.e. the Swedish sex purchase law, exerts a stronger influence on their attitudes than the global trend of more liberal attitudes towards the sale of sexual services. The question that primarily confirms the hypothesis is the one concerning attitudes towards the sex purchase law, a law that the students want to keep. The Swedish sex purchase law has been part of the legal system since 1999, in other words for 20 years. 91% of the students who responded to the survey are between 18-29 years old, which means that the law has existed for their whole or a large part of their lives.

A Swedish Government Official Report (SOU) from 2010 states that, based on gender equality and human rights perspectives, the focus must be shifted away from the supply side, those who sell sexual services, to the demand side, those who purchase sexual services or engage in human trafficking. Students' opposition to criminalization of the sale of sexual services show that they also believe that the focus should be on the perpetrator.

The report also claims that, since prostitution is always about exploitation of individuals, no distinction between voluntary and involuntary prostitution can be made.<sup>14</sup> This line of argument is widespread also among the students; there are very few who believe that the sale of sexual services is performed without external pressure or other underlying factors. This example of how a Swedish state authority frames and perceives the question is also the view conveyed to students through official documents, websites, news articles and such.

An outcome that confirms that the sex purchase law has been efficient is that street prostitution has been reduced by 50% since the law came into force.<sup>15</sup> This might be the reason why students have a greater confidence in the law (41%) than the rest of the population does (13%), because the students might still associate the sale of sexual services with street prostitution. On the other hand, new arenas such as internet have arisen where the purchase and sale of sexual services are widespread. This trade is difficult to investigate and the estimated number of unknown cases is large.<sup>16</sup> Those students, 59%, who believe that sexual services have not decreased after the sex purchase law was enacted might be active internet users. It is possible that they have been in contact with this new kind of online sex trade, an experience that then shapes their opinion about the effects that the sex purchase law has had. Despite some scepticism about the effects of the law,

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<sup>14</sup> SOU 2010:49. p. 59.

<sup>15</sup> SOU 2010:49. p. 19.

<sup>16</sup> Olsson, 2007. p. 61.

the students agree that the sex purchase law should be maintained in Sweden. After discussing the arguments above, one conclusion is that the Swedish context, where the students grew up, is stronger than more liberal views on legalization and decriminalization that exist in other parts of the world.

The question that primarily disproves the hypothesis is the question if the sale of sexual services can be seen as a salaried employment. The results from the Lund survey shows that 31%, a minority of the respondents, believes that it should be seen as salaried employment. But there is a greater support for this position among students than among the overall population (18%). It is also possible, through the soft answers, to deduce that several respondents think that the status of salaried employment would result in a better safety net for the people involved.

Several respondents believe that the right to unemployment fund, pension, and health insurance would increase the standard of living for persons selling sexual services. These positions might result from influence from other countries such as Germany and New Zealand, where the salaried employment system exists. The students are more familiar with these alternatives, legalization or decriminalisation, since we live in a more globalized world. One respondent reasons as follows (my translation from Swedish):

Looking at sexual services as salaried employment might lead to less stigma and safer working conditions for sex sellers. This is good because it is a marginalized group that falls between chairs in the community's support programs.

This way of arguing is in line with the reasoning in New Zealand when it implemented legislation that decriminalized the buying and selling of sexual services.<sup>17</sup> It is also the way in which sympathizers of the empowerment

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<sup>17</sup> Armstrong, 2017.

paradigm argue, which implies that the students have been influenced by more liberal voices on this subject.<sup>18</sup>

## **A hypothesis-driven survey, but is the hypothesis correct?**

So, is the hypothesis that the societal context of Swedish students, i.e. the Swedish sex purchase law, exerts a stronger influence on their attitudes than the global trend of more liberal attitudes towards the sale of sexual services, correct? The answer is both yes and no. As previously discussed, it depends on which part of the results that are being analysed. Only the hard results, that placed the students in the oppression paradigm would yield an affirmative answer – the students' context with prevailing sex purchase law has affected them more than liberal trends. This presumably is because the Swedish sex purchase law is largely framed around questions that can be found in the oppression paradigm.

But the analysis of the soft results as well as the word associations show that the students are not consistent in their views and can in fact also be placed in the empowerment and polymorphous paradigms. The positions contained in these paradigms can be found in a Swedish context but are not as widespread as the opinions in the oppression paradigm. This means that the more liberal attitude that exists in other countries regarding the sale of sexual services has influenced the students to the extent that the Swedish context is not the only relevant variable for how their positions are formed and shaped.

The Lund survey has generated empirical material about the attitudes of students towards the sale of sexual services. Hopefully, this research will contribute to filling the research gap that exists about the group 'students' and their attitudes, the part of the population that eventually will govern Swedish politics. Furthermore, it would be interesting to dig deeper into the subject and supplement the questionnaire survey with in depth interviews to broaden

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<sup>18</sup> Östergren, Petra. *Porr, horor och feminister*, Natur & Kultur, Stockholm, 2006. p. 263.

the knowledge about what attitudes the students have towards the sale of sexual services. Attitude surveys are an important part of generating knowledge about social phenomena of this kind. The buying and selling of sexual services is something that occurs everywhere, but a subject that we rarely talk about because of the stigma that surrounds it. Therefore, it is important to raise the issue both privately and publicly in order to find a solution that will ensure that the human rights of all those involved are respected.

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