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Opinion

Decriminalization of sex work would only expand abuse

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Mark Weber / Op Art (Mark Weber)

Amnesty International is considering a policy calling for governments to eliminate most laws that prohibit selling or buying sex.

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Special to The Times

AMNESTY International is considering supporting the global decriminalization of crimes related to commercial sexual exploitation. This would be a travesty. The sex trade is rapidly growing here and across the world. Decriminalization would only

expand the abuse and deepen the inequality inherent in the commercial sex trade.

Amnesty International's mission against sex trafficking is noble. However, decriminalization, including amnesty for sex buyers, pimps and brothel owners, stands in direct opposition to that mission. Decriminalization supports the very root of sex trafficking, which exists for one reason only: to supply the demand for commercial sex. By chilling the demand for sex buying, we chill the economic incentives for sex trafficking.

Sex buying causes harm — we must have no illusions about that. The vast majority of women in prostitution are physically assaulted by the men who buy them — one study showed 86 percent. The women are 18 times more likely to be murdered, and their death rate is 200 times higher. An estimated 90 percent of prostituted people worldwide are pimped.

Proponents of decriminalization suggest that “sex work” is just another form of labor. In fact, it is exploitation of the worst kind. The “workplace” homicide rate for prostituted people was 204 per 100,000, according to one study, compared to four per 100,000 for female liquor-store workers and 29 per 100,000 for male taxicab drivers. Being routinely assaulted, raped or murdered at work is not just another job.

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Commercial sexual exploitation is happening here in Seattle, and is growing. Our underground commercial-sex economy was \$112 million in 2007, more than doubling from 2003. A study found that 8,806 Seattle men visited Backpage.com's adult section in 24 hours — just one of more than 100 websites selling sex in King County.

Our children are at risk. Some 300 to 500 youths are involved in prostitution in the area at any given time. Eighty-three victims of youth sex trafficking were identified in nine months in 2014. County prosecutions of commercial sexual abuse of minors are expected to more than double this year.

Prostituted women likely started as young girls. The average age of entry is 12 to 14. Girls caught in the web of exploitation do not suddenly become “consensual” on their 18th birthday. The circumstances leading to prostitution — abuse at home, street survival, drug addiction, pimping, luring, grooming and trafficking — ensnare them in a way of life with no obvious exit.

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Decriminalization and legalization are failed experiments. Countries that have instituted these models are now reaping the consequences of increased violence, abuse and exponential spikes in sex trafficking. The people who benefit from decriminalization are the exploiters — the men who buy women and children for sex, the pimps who sell them, and the brothels, gangs and trafficking networks who feed the demand.

The Seattle City Attorney’s Office and King County Prosecutor’s Office support working toward the “Nordic model.” We have been putting that model into practice by refocusing prosecution emphasis on those causing the harm — the buyers — while connecting prostituted people with services to transition out of the sex trade. We must increase those services, while increasing penalties for buyers. This is the socially just path, and is the only way to end commercial sexual exploitation and the crimes associated with it.

Our community must work together to address the underlying issues giving rise to commercial sexual exploitation. The culture of male entitlement creates the demand, while gender, and racial and economic inequality create the breeding ground to supply it. These are hard problems to solve, but giving up cannot be an option.

As a human-rights group, Amnesty International would never advocate for the decriminalization of domestic violence, rape or other forms of gender-based violence — all closely tied to sex buying. Waving a wand to make commercial sex legal would do nothing to end the exploitation. Decriminalization would only intensify the abuse and increase trafficking, while ushering in a state-sanctioned system of human exploitation. We must stand against this abuse — not expand it.

We urge Amnesty International to stay true to its mission of standing up for the world's most vulnerable people, not support those who exploit them.

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