

STAND WITH SURVIVORS: BACK PARTIAL DECRIMINALIZATION OF THE SEX TRADE



The Equality Model,
or partial decriminalization, protects
survivors but **NOT** their exploiters.

The Impact of the Sex Trade

Nearly five million individuals are sexually exploited worldwide—99 percent of whom are woman and girls, including women of color, transgender women, immigrants and Indigenous women. Between 2007 and 2017, there were [34,700 sex trafficking cases reported](#) in the United States alone—the majority of them involving U.S. citizens.

These stats paint a vivid, disturbing picture of reality for thousands of women lured each year into “the Life”—a term used by survivors to describe the sex trade. Recently, World Without Exploitation uncovered [a series of new and horrifying findings](#) from women exposed to prostitution and sex trafficking in different states across the U.S.

Realities of the Sex Trade

As many jurisdictions, like New York and Washington, D.C., introduce bills to decriminalize the entire sex trade this year, the voices of survivors are far too often silenced and forgotten. In Washington, D.C., [legislation was re-introduced](#) this month to fully decriminalize the



commercial sex trade, including criminal acts from buyers and exploiters (i.e., “Johns” and “pimps”) as well as brothels. This is a perfect example of a policy that ignores the trauma that survivors experience and does nothing to protect women and girls from extreme violence or break the cycle of abuse. Buyers and exploiters, who are overwhelmingly white, male and wealthy, need no such protection—and such legislation will expand the sex industry, luring more marginalized women and girls into the trauma of “the Life” as our nation’s

capital, appallingly, becomes a hub for sex tourism and sex trafficking.

Because the decriminalization debate will continue to grow louder in states across the country as we near the 2020 election, we want you to know the juxtaposition between full decriminalization and the status quo is a false choice. **Sexual exploitation of vulnerable communities is not a progressive value.** There is a better way forward where survivors are heard, centered and protected.

THE WAY FORWARD

Take the Survivors' Side

We can make strides to all but eliminate the instances of trauma and harm against women in “the Life,” and decrease demand from buyers and exploiters by **implementing partial decriminalization**. Under this approach individuals that sell sex acts are protected from arrest and prosecution, but **NOT** their buyers or exploiters.

To effectively decriminalize commercial sexual exploitation in the U.S., it's important to look at models of success from around the world. Partial decriminalization policies in countries like Norway, France, Canada, Iceland, Sweden and Israel protect survivors from being criminalized and stigmatized while continuing to hold accountable buyers and exploiters who prey on vulnerable individuals and profit from their trauma.

This “Equality Model” works to close “**on-ramps**” into the industry for women and girls, like lack of employment, affordable housing and substance abuse, and open “**off-ramps**,” like investing in treatment for addiction and mental health, transitional housing and job opportunities. By providing avenues for exiting the sex trade while maintaining prohibitions against the act of purchasing sex acts—demand for the industry will decrease.

This approach puts survivors at the center of the debate by ensuring their health, well-being and economic opportunity comes first instead of prioritizing corporations, organized crime networks and sex tourists looking to take advantage of weak laws. We urge you to support this approach and involve survivors in the discussion.

More information

If you would like more information on partial decriminalization of the sex trade—and relevance for the upcoming debates—please reach out to **Yasmin Vafa**, founder and Executive Director of Rights4Girls, a human rights organization dedicated to ending gender-based violence against marginalized young women and girls in the U.S. by contacting her at:

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For further reading, see opinion pieces from [sex trade survivors and advocates](#), and a [survivor letter to all 2020 candidates](#).

