

The tide is finally turning in Italy in favour of protecting women in the sex trade

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A bill to legalise sex work, and criminalise the buying of it, follows the successful Nordic model

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I've just returned from a conference in Rome called Prostitution: Is Italy ready for the Nordic model?. The event was the first of its kind to be held in the Italian senate and it has caused some controversy.

A new bill drafted by senator Alessandra Maiorino was launched at the event, which, if approved by parliament, would criminalise the buying of sex and decriminalise those in prostitution. Known as the [Nordic model \(https://nordicmodelnow.org\)](https://nordicmodelnow.org), this approach to tackling the harms of the sex trade was first introduced in Sweden in 1999 and has since been adopted by a number of countries, including the Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland, France, Norway, Sweden, Iceland and Israel.

Outside the venue, a small protest group representing sex workers and allies accused the organisers of "talking about our lives and bodies without even inviting us to the discussion table", despite the fact that the views of pro-legalisation individuals are in the evidence that is included in the bill. Perhaps more significantly, the voices of those women who have survived the sex trade and since left it are loud and clear in this debate.

The tide is turning in Italy about the sex trade. Maiorino, a parliamentarian in the Five Star Movement party, has garnered cross-party support, with speakers at the conference representing youth, violence against women and gender equality.

Evaluation shows that this Nordic model approach has reduced the number of women in prostitution and that it challenges the culture of acceptability of men paying for sex. There are calls from abolitionists, including many sex trade [survivors \(https://www.spaceintl.org\)](https://www.spaceintl.org), to introduce the law globally.

Italy has a history of legislating against the sex trade. In 1958, senator Lina Merlin introduced the Merlin law, which effectively abolished legal brothels. Before the law was introduced there were [560 state approved \(https://www.associazioneiroko.org/tag/merlin-law\)](https://www.associazioneiroko.org/tag/merlin-law) brothels. The law also abolished the keeping of records of prostituted women, freeing them from the stigma associated with selling (but not buying) sex and providing support to leave. The key aim of the law was to reduce the numbers of women being forced, coerced or exploited into prostitution. It is regarded by Italian feminists as the foundation for a human rights critique of commercial sexual exploitation.

There are increasing ways in which women can be coerced into prostitution
Alessandra Maiorino

The law periodically comes under fire from those in favour of legalisation. The most recent example came in March 2019 when it was [challenged](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-berlusconi-prostitutes-idUSKCN0T21ZS20151113) (<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-berlusconi-prostitutes-idUSKCN0T21ZS20151113>) by the court of appeal in Bari in relation to a case in which businessman Giampaolo Tarantini was convicted of aiding and abetting prostitution by recruiting “escorts” for the then prime minister Silvio Berlusconi. Lawyers argued that prostitution is organised differently than in 1958 and that women now have sexual freedom and therefore can freely choose to be sex workers. The appeal was rejected by the constitutional court and the Merlin law was upheld.

According to Maiorino, there is more violence, abuse and exploitation in the sex trade than in 1958. “There are increasing ways in which women can be coerced into prostitution,” she said.

In fact, as Ilaria Baldini from Resistenza Femminista, a feminist activist group, told me, prostitution across Italy was “totally normalised” and the police often ignored the criminal exploitation of women in brothels and on street, rarely targeting pimps or buyers.

In March, Roberto Saviano (whose book *Gomorra* exposed one of Italy’s most powerful mafia networks) wrote an article for *Corriere della Sera*, arguing that legalising prostitution in Italy was necessary, that prostitution was a “real profession” and that the only way that women can be protected within the sex trade is to “regulate” it.

The article caused huge controversy and the newspaper was inundated with emails from anti-sex trade feminists, demanding a right to reply. Monica Ricci Sargentini, a reporter at the newspaper, supported the call for a feminist response; as a result, she was issued with a written warning [and threatened](https://feministpost.it/en/italy/caso-sargentini-lassordante-silenzio-di-roberto-saviano) (<https://feministpost.it/en/italy/caso-sargentini-lassordante-silenzio-di-roberto-saviano>) with a three-day suspension.

Despite the significant resistance from pro-legalisation activists in Italy and [elsewhere](https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jun/19/the-human-rights-sex-trade-case-that-will-harm-women) (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/jun/19/the-human-rights-sex-trade-case-that-will-harm-women>), its benefits are clear. Everywhere it has been implemented, the number of women in prostitution has fallen, as has violence – including homicide – against them. Neither is it an overly punitive or “carceral” law; proposals within Maiorino’s bill for sex buyers are typically modest: for first offenders, a fine of €1,500 to €5,000 and a police caution. Those that reoffend more than once in five years can be fined up to €15,000. A prison sentence of between six months to three years can be avoided if the buyers participate in a perpetrator re-education programme.

On the other hand, legalisation is always disastrous, as I discovered during my [research](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/11/prostitution-legalised-sex-trade-pimps-women) (<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/oct/11/prostitution-legalised-sex-trade-pimps-women>). Germany introduced blanket legalisation in 2002 and, as

parliamentarian Leni Breymaier told delegates in Rome, it has since become one of the fastest growing destinations for traffickers of women and children.

“There should never have been the scandal of Berlusconi,” she tells me. “And nor should any Italian men be led by his example.”