



New report states that there are 70 percent more women selling sexual services in Norway today than in 2009.

The prostitution arenas of larger Norwegian cities experienced an influx of Nigerian women from 2004 to 2008. This sparked an intense public and political debate whether or not to put in force a law making it illegal to purchase sex in Norway. The law states that you are allowed to sell sexual services in Norway, but since January 2009 it has been illegal for Norwegian citizens/people living in Norway to buy sexual services, whether in Norway or overseas. Buying sexual services is punishable with a fine and up to one year in prison. One of the main arguments for the new legislation was to prevent the possibility of women becoming victims of human trafficking.

Since 2008, the number of prostitutes in the streets of Norway has decreased by 30 percent, but the annual report of 2011 from "Pro Senteret", the city of Oslo's resource center on matters related to prostitution, also shows that prostitutes are now coming back regardless of the new legislation.

Estimates from Oslo show that 850 women sold sex in Oslo last year, compared to 500 women in 2009. This is an increase of 70 percent according to the "Pro Senteret" annual report of 2011.

- The economic situation in Southern Europe will have an impact on these women. When they can earn more money in Norway, it is natural that they will try their luck in Oslo, says Bjørg Norli, director of "Pro Senteret", Oslo's resource center on matters related to prostitution. She has been working with this topic for 12 years.

In 2011, women from Nigeria count for the biggest group on Oslo's resource center's contact list. This might indicate that women from Nigeria represent the biggest group of prostitutes in Norway. Some of these women have entered Norway illegally and risk deportation. Others might wish to return to Nigeria, but have problems doing so on their own. The women have different experiences and deal with their problems in Europe in different ways, but all have as their starting point that they want to improve their own lives and that of their families by migrating from Nigeria to Europe.

Recruitment

- I'm turning off my brain when I'm out with customers because I want to distinguish between work and private life, said «Maria» in a news report on Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation (NRK). She is one of Oslo's foreign prostitutes located near the port area. Her experience is that customers still want to do business, but that they use the economic downturn to negotiate a lower price, making it even more challenging for the prostitutes.

According to Janni Wintherbauer, director of the interest organization for prostitution in Norway, the pimps have started to recruit more women to earn as much as before the economic downturn.

- All in all pimps earn the same as before the Euro crisis by increasing the number of women. But the women are getting even poorer, said Janni Wintherbauer to NRK.

Government effort

Figures from the Norwegian Police show that there has been a decrease of 20 percent of people being caught for buying sexual services from 2010 to 2011.

This could either indicate that less Norwegians are buying sexual services, or as Bjørg Norli puts it: "it reflects the government's effort on the matters of prostitution".

She also emphasizes that the number of people reported for human trafficking has only slightly increased to 32 people, two more than in 2010, despite the new report showing that more prostitutes are coming to Norway.

Stigmatized

Since the beginning of the 1990s there has been a slow transition of responsibility for prostitution from the Ministry of Health and Social Affairs towards a greater responsibility to the Ministry of Justice and the Police. New laws have been implemented regarding prostitution in Norway as well as many other European countries.

- Stronger judicial regulations have been used as a recipe to deal with the issue of prostitution. Today, everything except selling sexual services is criminalized in Norway. But the hunt, the chase after the "hooker", has been intensified and women are now more often stigmatized, says Bjørg Norli.

No other alternatives

To travel from North Africa to Europe, most migrants are dependent on assistance in getting both documents and transportation. This creates a market for human smugglers who offer their services for money, either paid in advance or when the customer arrives in Europe. Because this does not necessarily require exploiting the migrants' situation, human smuggling is sometimes considered a "victimless crime", according to the research report "Facing Return" conducted by Fafo, an independent research foundation in Oslo.

There is, however, a danger that smugglers exploit their power, controlling the life and destiny of migrants. Thus, migrants who use smugglers risk being victims of trafficking. Moreover, if the transport from North Africa to Europe is arranged by someone contacting vulnerable female

migrants with the intention to recruit them into prostitution – that person will be guilty of human trafficking, not smuggling.

- For the majority of these women who are looking for a brighter future prostitution is the only alternative. Different agents have often been involved in the migration process and their prostitution debut is a result of being without any other alternatives, because of debt to different agents, some of which are traffickers and family obligations, according to Bjørg Norli.

She claims that in reality there are no legal migration options from Nigeria to Europe and wants to raise the question: "Could it be the case that countries' strict immigration policies are actually making people more vulnerable and facilitating human trafficking?"

Migration to the benefit of all

One group of prostitutes in Norway are women from Nigeria who, after several years in Europe, have given up the dream that they can make it here. They find themselves forced to work in prostitution in order to provide for family in Nigeria and/or to repay traffickers and others. These women feel helpless and miserable, and many would be ready to return if they believed a return to Nigeria might improve their situation.

- But victims of human trafficking usually don't want to talk about human trafficking. They don't fulfill our expectation of what a victim is. Their reasons for, and attitudes to, migration do not change and they would perhaps migrate again under uncertain circumstances, says Bjørg Norli.

She argues that instead they need substantial help and support to get a brighter future, in contrast to being left outside without money and self-confidence, struggling with personal traumas and depression.

- I hope we can do something about this. Spend five years to see how it works when we encourage migration to the benefit of all. We have to realize that people will not stop migrating, says Bjørn Norli.