Fact Sheet on the Nordic Model

Background
Until very recently, the issue of prostitution was one-sided; laws nationally and internationally prohibited a person from selling their body. These laws penalized prostitutes rather than those demanding services, commonly referred to as pimps and Johns. Global opinions on this topic began to change in 1999, when Sweden adopted a set of laws and policies penalizing the demand for commercial sex and simultaneously decriminalizing prostitution commonly referred to as the Nordic Model. Additionally, these policies provided prostitutes with support services upon exiting the sex trade. Service organizations began providing extensive rehabilitative assistance to victims of the sex trade including courses on financial assistance, job training, and education, as well as drug treatment and psychotherapy treatments. Originally coined, the Swedish Model, this system of handling prostitution law, became known as the Nordic Model with the establishment of similar laws in Norway (2008) and Iceland (2009). Since the popularization of these laws, many other countries and governing bodies have discussed implementing similar systems including: France, Ireland, United Kingdom, European Union, Council of Europe, Canada, South Africa, India, United States, and Israel. Bodies such as the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women are supporters of the Nordic Model as a means of curbing the sex trade.

Support for the Nordic Model
Proponents of the Nordic Model insist that prostitution and sex work only exist in the modern world because of their significant demand, rather than their supply; in other words were this demand to decrease or disappear, the supply would also decrease or disappear as a direct result. In countries without Nordic Model legislation, many organizations see the importance of such a model and are trying to change individual’s behavior by educating young men about prostitution in order to prevent future purchases. Locally, for example, the Chicago Alliance Against Sexual Exploitation is involved in work to educate young men about the perils of prostitution in order to prevent them from becoming buyers of sex in the future. Internationally, Swedish Chancellor of Justice, Anna Skarhed, submitted a report in 2010 that consisted of research on the effects of the implementation of the new legislation between 1999-2008. This report concludes that the 1999 law was successful in its goals of prevention and combating of prostitution and human trafficking in Sweden. Since the implementation of this law, street prostitution was cut in half in Sweden and the legislation led to a change in community behavior amongst those who purchase sex.

Statistics from Norway suggest similar effects in the country. A 2012 report conducted by the social service agency ProSentret followed up on a similar study conducted in Oslo in 2008. According to this report, street prostitution decreased by at least 50% in the years following the law’s implementation, and nearly all accounts of violence against prostitutes decreased since the passage of the law in 2008. In fact, many women working as prostitutes reported to threaten clients who assault them by claiming that they will call the police and have the perpetrator arrested; a new ability since the passage of the law.

1 The Netherlands legalized prostitution in 2000, and prostitution has existed legally in certain counties in Nevada since 1902
2 Political and economic collaboration between European Countries
3 Main European human rights organization
4 Evaluation of the Prohibition of the Purchase of Sexual Services (2010)
Opposition to the Nordic Model
Research has shown that traffickers are less likely to bring victims into countries that have implemented the Nordic Model and create prostitution rings. However, claims remain that traffickers have simply moved their trades to surrounding countries with more lenient laws. This speaks to the claim that the Nordic Model does not cure the problem; it only moves it to another territory. Many migration experts suggest that because of this legislation, human traffickers are now inclined to bring their victims to neighboring countries with less restrictive laws, such as: Denmark, Russia, and Finland. Additionally, traffickers have become more inclined to transport their victims to countries even farther from home that have more lenient laws regarding the purchase of sex. Often, these countries have a weaker rule of law, overall, and have lower socioeconomic status and poor healthcare, all of which lead to the further decline in status of these women. Opponents also mention that because purchasing sex remains criminal for clients, the men often insist on more underground and dangerous venues, which eventually lead to further harm for women. Additionally, involvement in the sex trade continues to hold a heavy stigma for women because the laws do not specifically address social structure or cultural norms. Experts in the field suggest that legislation cannot be the only option used to address prostitution. Programs aimed at ending demand of these services are also needed in order to create sustainable, systemic change.

Evaluation of the Nordic Model
According to The Global Gender Gap Report (2013), three of the four countries with the highest amount of gender equality have implemented legislation in accordance with the Nordic Model. The cultural differences that exist between countries and geographic regions play a crucial role in determining the best way to address the demand for prostitution and sex trafficking. Decriminalization and legalization of prostitution do not erase cultural stigmas against women working in the sex trade, nor do they address the violence and harm so often caused to those involved in the sex trade or the trafficking of minors, which is a pressing problem. Legislation cannot solve these complex social issues alone. Any party seeking to play a role in the fight against sex trafficking must take a holistic approach, one that addresses cultural norms and social stigmas as well as incorporates themes such as public awareness campaigns, cultural education among future buyers of sex, and legal protection for the victims of the sex trade.

Lessons Learned/Best Practices
When considering funding programs targeting the eradication of prostitution, it is imperative to understand the legal implications, as well as the cultural norms of the population in question. Please consider the following questions:

- Does the program work to curb demand of prostitution through education, legislation, or both?
- Does the organization provide direct services to women leaving the sex trade? Or does the organization seek to provide a shift in social behavior on a larger scale?
- How are the services provided culturally sensitive?
- Does the organization operate in a country where prostitution has been decriminalized or legalized? If so, how does this affect the mission and practices of the organization?
- Does the organization seek to introduce legislation recommending decriminalization?
- Does the organization have a history working with the target population? If so, what have been some past achievements?