

Summary

On the boundaries of what we can measure: The methodological quality of international studies on the prevalence of prostitution related human trafficking with emphasize on North West Europe

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In response to a motion made by Dutch members of parliament Segers and Van der Staaij, a literature study was conducted comparing prostitution policies between several countries in North Western Europe and the effects of those policies on the prevalence of human trafficking.

In this literature study an initial 172 studies were identified, and a further 46 studies were subsequently selected on the basis that they proved to be empirical studies. The methodological quality of these studies were then coded in greater detail. The selected studies were performed in the following countries: The Netherlands, Belgium, Great Britain, Germany, Sweden, Norway, Finland and Denmark.

What immediately came to the fore was both the diversity of the content of the coded studies and how very few studies really elaborate on the relations between (changes in) prostitution policies and the prevalence of human trafficking. Internationally there appear to be large differences between the prostitution policies of the differing countries, resulting in varying definitions of what constitutes (illegal) prostitution. A consequence of this variability in definitions is that statistical comparisons are not based on the same kind of populations. This is for instance the case in the studies by Eurostat, which they have acknowledged as such in their foreword.

It was further established that the definition of what constitutes the relation between human trafficking and prostitution also differs across studies. The majority of studies were conducted on the basis of the relation between the prevalence of illegal prostitution and policy making. But illegal prostitution is not an indicator of human trafficking as such. On the other hand, studies which research human trafficking have a broader focus than prostitution only (in fact, the estimate is that 80% of human trafficking is related to prostitution).

It appears that human trafficking is not only a forbidden practice but also one that is hidden, and consequently the estimation of the prevalence of these 'hidden populations' has proven to be notoriously difficult (so called dark number estimations).

For all the above reasons all of the 46 empirical studies were reviewed very critically on their scientific rigor, in order to make sure that any statement on the relations between prostitution policies and the prevalence of human trafficking would be based on sound research.

As a result of this, the coded studies were not valid and reliable enough to provide dependable estimates of the effects of prostitution policies on the prevalence of human trafficking. In addition, for those countries that use some form of regulation we did not find convincing evidence for the scale theory (i.e. the prevalence of human trafficking will increase), nor for the substitution theory (the prevalence of human trafficking will decline as a result of more lenient policies). In countries where prostitution is illegal / criminalised we also did not find convincing evidence that this leads to a decline in demands for prostitution services, nor to a decline in the prevalence of human trafficking as a result of this criminalisation. The quality of data of the coded studies was simply not strong

enough to make sound estimations of the prevalence of human trafficking, let alone to elaborate on the causal relation between prostitution politics and human trafficking.

In order to improve the validity and reliability of future research on the relation between prostitution politics and the prevalence of human trafficking, three types of studies were distinguished that might contribute towards this aim:

- studies based on registers are necessary in international perspective. Those studies might be much improved when different national databases are better synchronised. In order to achieve this, international consensus will have to be reached on what constitutes both legal and illegal prostitution, but also on exploitation and human trafficking for the sex industry. It is necessary to develop databases solely for this purpose. We found one study where databases were used to make estimations by using the capture-recapture method. In practice these databases proved to be too much interdependence of the databases, to come up with valid answers. Improving the quality of (inter)national databases might contribute towards a more successful use of this method.
- mixed method research is a very promising way to conduct studies on a regional level. Making clever combinations of studies in different cities / regions could lead to new and more thorough insights on the relation between prostitution policies and the prevalence of human trafficking.
- there appeared to be an increase of Internet studies. Currently the Internet is mostly used as a means to conduct a first exploration of the field and to establish first contact with stakeholders for further research. However, the international sex industry is a highly dynamic world, constantly in motion: sex workers work under varying names and on different addresses. The Internet might thus be utilised to study these so called translocations, for instance after policy changes, in order to gain more insight into the causal relation between the prevalence of human trafficking, prostitution policies and police actions (preservation).