

OPINION

Elizabeth Warren 'open' to decriminalizing prostitution, victimizing exploited women again

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Elizabeth Warren is vying for the Democratic Party nomination for 2020. Here are five things you should know about the senator from Massachusetts. USA TODAY

Embracing 'sex workers' seems like a progressive policy. In reality, it treats pimps and exploiters like managers and will worsen sexual exploitation.

For many supporters of Sen. Elizabeth Warren of Massachusetts for president — of which I am one — her comments on prostitution policy announced during a recent town hall meeting were a real shocker.

Following up on the [wider plan outlining her LGBT policy](#), Warren tweeted: “[I am open to decriminalizing sex work](#). Sex workers, like all workers, deserve autonomy and are particularly vulnerable to physical and financial abuse.”

Touted as progressive policy, it's important to examine what's behind the liberal label, which in this case is quite regressive. Decriminalization of the prostitution industry would harm the women it purports to help.

Nikki Bell is the CEO of [LIFT](#) (Living in Freedom Together), a prostitution survivor-led organization based in Worcester, Massachusetts, that provides resources and support to survivors. In responding to Warren's plan, Bell tells me:

“Prostituted women do deserve autonomy, but autonomy is not having your body rented to the highest bidder, having acts performed on you that buyers deem too vile to expose their partners to. I am disappointed in Sen. Warren's statements and would invite her to have a conversation about the realities and harms of prostitution before supporting legislation that benefit the privileged few that choose, as opposed to the masses in prostitution that never had a choice to begin with.

Prostitution is not just another job

Warren's announcement is a rebuke to survivors who know in their bones that treating prostitution as simply another job is a prized gift to pimps, traffickers, and the men who purchase women and girls for sexual gratification. As journalist and Justice for Women founder Julie Bindel has [argued](#), "If prostitutes are the workers, who are the bosses? Pimps and brothel keepers."

Hollywood Madam: [Want to stop human trafficking? Legalize consensual sex for money.](#)

Let's do away with the language of "sex work" and "sex workers," which doesn't dignify prostituted women but rather ennoble the sex trade and its minions.

Cherie Jimenez, who directs the survivor-led [EVA Center](#) in Boston, an exit program for prostituted women and girls, tells me that she believes people don't understand that decriminalization effectively means "a complete open market of abuse and pimping." Jimenez says decriminalization of prostitution can make victims more vulnerable to the exploitation and violence "inherent in the sex trade" — violence she witnesses every day in helping victims of sexual exploitation who come through her center.



Sen. Elizabeth Warren speaks during a town hall event on October 18, 2019, in Norfolk, Virginia. (Photo: Zach Gibson, Getty Images)

Several studies have found a connection between sexual abuse during childhood and victims turning to prostitution. Most women in prostitution do not want to be in the industry, according to a 2003 study, which found that [89% of prostituted women](#) want

to escape. A 2012 study found that, in countries where prostitution is legalized, the [market for sex is expanded](#), and that there is an even higher rate of human trafficking in the country. This effect is strongest in high-income countries.

Yet decriminalization advocates maintain that the “sex work” model protects women by decriminalizing persons in prostitution. I agree that decriminalizing persons who are prostituted is necessary because no one should be criminalized for her own exploitation.

Promoting sex work to children: [Hey, Teen Vogue, on career day, no young girl should say, 'I want to be a prostitute.'](#)

However, pro-sex work advocates go much further, and the consequences of their proposals are to let loose the perpetrators of sexual exploitation by [romanticizing them as protectors](#). Advocates would have us believe that decriminalization of pimps is necessary to “manage” women by turning pimps overnight into [third-party business agents](#) and by accepting sex buyers as cordial clients. This is akin to letting the proverbial foxes guard the chicken coop.

Hold buyers, not victims, responsible

Thankfully, the tide may be turning against decriminalization of prostitution. This summer in New York state, a decriminalization bill was [launched by supporters](#). [Taina Bien-Aimé](#), director of the international Coalition Against Trafficking in Women who advocated with a network of organizations that opposed the bill, tells me that after state legislators were educated to the harmful consequences of decriminalization, the bill was dead on arrival.

The National Organization of Women has opposed a similar bill in Washington, D.C., on the grounds that it would make the nation's capital a “[sex tourism capital](#) and harm marginalized girls and women in our community.” Last month, The Washington Post's Editorial Board [rejected the decriminalization bill](#) that has divided the city council.

Exploited: [Who buys a trafficked child for sex? Otherwise ordinary men.](#)

Americans are waking up to the fact that giving legal permission to those who buy sex or profit from it will worsen, not improve, the sexual exploitation of persons who are victimized by it.

The alternative to full decriminalization of the prostitution industry is decriminalization of those who are prostituted, as well as legislation that makes sex buyers accountable for their actions — an approach sometimes called the [Nordic Model](#). In addition to Sweden, Norway and Iceland, this model has also been adopted in [France, Ireland, Canada and Northern Ireland](#).

At the very least, Sen. Warren should familiarize herself with her own state's anti-trafficking legislation, which also addresses sexual exploitation and the men who pay for sex.

Massachusetts has one of the strongest [state anti-trafficking laws](#) in the nation. Part of its strength derives from the fact that the law addresses the demand side of trafficking and prostitution by upping the penalties on those who purchase persons, mainly women, for sex. In making men accountable for their sexual exploitation of women and children, the law teaches that sex buyers can no longer hide behind a screen of anonymity. The legislation also makes clear prostitution is not a victimless crime, and women and children are not products to be bought or sold.

If only Sen. Warren, as a presidential candidate, took her policy cues from her own state.

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