

EUROPE

Amnesty International Votes for Policy Calling for Decriminalization of Prostitution

By DOREEN CARVAJAL AUG. 11, 2015

PARIS — After days of emotional debates and intense lobbying, delegates from Amnesty International voted on Tuesday to support a policy that calls for decriminalization of the sex trade, including prostitution, payment for sex and brothel ownership.

The vote came on the last day of a biennial meeting in Dublin of about 400 members of the human rights organization from 60 countries. They had gathered to set the group's future policies.

The proposal about prostitution provoked an aggressive lobbying campaign by international groups opposed to sparing buyers and pimps from penalties. Competing petitions were organized by women's groups and celebrities—including former President Jimmy Carter, who issued a letter on Monday — appealing to the group to maintain penalties for buyers and to “stay true to its mission.”

After two years of research and consultation with its members, Amnesty says it concluded that decriminalization is the best way to reduce risks for prostitutes. The organization contends that they are exposed to arbitrary arrest and detention, extortion and harassment, and physical and sexual violence.

With the vote, Amnesty International's 12-member board will now hammer out the final draft of a policy that the group will use to lobby governments to repeal most laws that forbid the sale and purchase of sex. The group's resolution called

for a policy that “supports the full decriminalization of all aspects of consensual sex work.”

“Sex workers are one of the most marginalized groups in the world who in most instances face constant risk of discrimination, violence and abuse,” Salil Shetty, the secretary general of the organization, said in a statement after the vote.

The proposal split human rights activists. Amnesty chapters in Sweden and France pressed the group to support a so-called Swedish or Nordic model, now followed in several Scandinavian countries, that spares prostitutes from penalties but sanctions the buyers with heavy fines and prison terms. Lawmakers in France are pushing new legislation to punish buyers that most likely will be voted on in the fall.

After the vote, the Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution, a French organization, vowed that it would no longer work with Amnesty International. “Amnesty chooses impunity for pimps and johns and not protection from sexual abuse for all women,” the coalition’s executive director, Grégoire Théry, said.

Margot Wallstrom, Sweden’s foreign minister, said she was concerned about the effect of Amnesty’s new policy because it is a respected organization.

“They mixed all these arguments, and that worries me,” she said. “It is a myth about the happy prostitute who does this as a free choice. Unfortunately, I can now hear people saying ‘hurrah’ — all those johns and pimps who run the brothels. It’s a multibillion-euro industry.”

Amnesty will give its national chapters leeway to decide whether to support or lobby for decriminalization.

“There are no plans to have a major campaign with a focus on this,” said Sarah Beamish, a board member who will help draft the final policy over the next few months. “It’s really up to each section to take this issue up on the local level. There are no plans for a global focus.”

Although the vote was taken openly among the delegates, the meeting was closed and the vote count was kept confidential. Ms. Beamish said the resolution had passed “comfortably.”

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