



Lecture Series of the Department of Development Studies

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***The Swedish Approach to the Sex Trade –
Repression and its Repercussions***

Wednesday, 10 April 2019, 4.15-5.45 pm

Seminar room, IE, Department of African Studies
Spitalgasse 2, Courtyard 5, 1090 Vienna

Chair:

Brigitte Temel

Sweden has a so-called “repressive” policy approach to the sex trade. There are no venues where sexual services can be traded legally, since most aspects of this sort of trade are criminalized. Sweden’s repressive approach is informed by the idea that it is inherently harmful to exchange sexual acts for remuneration. Not only are individuals who engage in such exchanges thought of as being harmed, but the sex trade is believed to harm society as a whole. The Swedish government promotes the approach as a great success, claiming that it represses the illicit sex trade, combats human trafficking, while promoting gender equality and even sustainable development. Several countries have taken inspiration from Sweden in revising their policy approaches, much due to promotional efforts around selected aspects of the Swedish approach. Meanwhile, international organization such as Amnesty International and the World Health Organization are calling for the decriminalization of the exchange of sex for remuneration between consenting adults. The call to do so is informed by the cumulative evidence demonstrating that criminalization poses barriers for dealing with serious problems that are associated with sex work. Empirical data show that sex workers face increased risks of becoming infected with HIV and STIs and of experiencing abuse and violence. Criminalization also appears as a barrier when it comes to the realization of the human rights of sex workers, as well as their access to safety, social care services, state protection and redress for crimes committed against them. Issues such as these are more difficult to address when aspects of the sex trade are criminalized and sex workers have to operate in clandestine environments. In my presentation I provide a closer look into the repercussions of a repressive approach to the sex trade, discussing the case of Sweden. I draw on interviews with Swedish actors who engage in these kinds of exchanges, as well as actors whose work focuses on the sex trade in various ways. The Swedish case is compared to Germany and New Zealand, two countries that approach the sex trade in starkly different ways to Sweden. I argue that rather than promoting equality, the repressive Swedish approach constitutes an excellent example of how inequality is maintained and reproduced through criminal justice institutions and practices.