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Should Female Prostitution Be Legalized? An Opinion Survey of Jordanian Citizens Living in  
the United States

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### Abstract

Prostitution is a worldwide phenomenon in which different cultures attempt to control and regulate sex work often with terrible consequences. The purpose of the current study is to examine the opinions of Jordanian citizens living in the United States concerning the legalization of prostitution. To provide a better understanding of prostitution in the Middle East, this research explores the opinions of Jordanian citizens on the legalization of prostitution in the Middle East. The research asks participants about prostitution as it relates to health, victimization, and the marginalization of prostitutes, as well as the ways in which prostitutes lack protection through society's safety nets. Previous research suggests that positive changes in society's opinions regarding prostitution can lead to better lives for sex workers, their families, and society in general. Some of the benefits include quality health care, reduction in diseases including STDS, safety from acts of violence and exploitation, as well as the availability of greater legal protections for sex workers. Data were collected using an online survey administered through Qualtrics. The online survey consisted of 20 mostly closed-ended questions. The findings revealed that nearly all of the respondents have negative attitudes about prostitution believing that sex work exploits vulnerable women. In addition, the majority of respondents view prostitutes as immoral, "weak", and irreligious.

*Keywords:* prostitution, legalization, survey methodology, Jordanian citizens

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## **Should Female Prostitution Be Legalized? An Opinion Survey of Jordanian Citizens Living in the United States**

### **Prostitution Causes Physical, Psychological, and Emotional Harm**

Around the world today, there is a human rights crisis involving the sexual abuse of millions of women, children, and thousands of men in prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation (Hughes, 2004). During 2003, the Trafficking in Persons report showed that 600,000 – 800,000 people were trafficked worldwide (U.S. Department of State, 2011). Eighty percent of victims of sexual exploitation were female (U.S. Department of State, 2011). The literature on the ethics of prostitution covers a range of different arguments, including arguments that focus on the intrinsic badness of trading sex, objectification, exploitation, gender hierarchy, and harm (Thomsen, 2015). From this literature, several different sources of harm can be distinguished. Stigma and violence are the two-best justifications for the argument that prostitution causes extrinsic harms. Arguments against prostitution are based on a belief that selling sex is harmful because it involves selling something deeply personal and emotional (Ahmed, 2014). Sex work is a “dangerous phenomenon” that routinely violates women’s rights and perpetuates their subordination to men. Sexual exploitation can take many forms, from the extreme sexual repression of women in Afghanistan, to the policies of governments like Thailand, which not only condone, but encourage women and children to sell themselves (Hanna, 2002).

In many cultures religious texts refer to prostitution. For example, when the Quran was revealed to prophet Mohammad it forbade prostitution and allowed polygamy as a divine mechanism, but always subject to the statement: “And do not go near illicit sexual acts” (Quran 17: 32). Christianity prohibited all sexual acts except sex for child conception. However, the new testament’s portrayal of Mary Magdalene as a prostitute created a new perception that prostitutes

were poor, exploited women who need to be “saved” rather than condemned (Carrasquillo, 2014). That prostitutes suffer harm is empirically well- documented. For example, Farley cites a 1996 study showing that prostitutes suffered from a slew of work – related health problems, including “exhaustion, frequent viral illness, STDs, vaginal infections, back aches, sleeplessness, depression, headache, stomachaches, and eating disorders” (Thomsen, 2015, p. 2). A significant number of prostitutes suffer from panic attacks, eating disorders, depression, and insomnia. Many experience guilt, regret, and remorse after having sold sex, and the suicide rate among prostitutes is six times that of the general population (Moen, 2014).

### **Discrimination Against Prostitutes Leads to More Violence**

Sexual violence has been identified by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a “serious public health and human rights problem” (Lea, Callaghan, Grafton, Falcone & Shaw, 2016). A victim who is raped or abused in a criminal setting loses her rights to protection because she is participating in criminal activity. Pimps and sex industry profiteers have made prostitution into a system of domination that is remarkably consistent across cultures – one that mirrors the dynamics of power and control exerted by domestic violence perpetrators over the women they abuse (Farley, 2003).

When prostitutes face violence they have nowhere to turn. Consequently, prostitutes are an easy target, and even serve as the butt of jokes about violence and murder on TV shows and movies. Violent people are more likely to prey on sex workers, confident that they won’t be reported to police. This leaves workers dependent on pimps and madams for protection, which often leads to more violence. Street sex workers are subject to high levels of social exclusion. Physical and verbal violence is an important common experience for many sex workers. As a result, in the countries where sex work is illegal and stigmatized, sex workers are afraid of

reporting crime to the police because of the fear of being arrested themselves (Hung, 2015; Immordino & Russo, 2015).

The consequences of physical violence in those countries can often lead to other severe problems, including the breakdown of avenues of trust between the police and sex workers that can destroy understanding on both sides. Where AIDS is pandemic (often in those areas where prostitution is illegal), there appears to be low coverage of preventative programs, large numbers of affected people who do not know their HIV status, and high levels of stigma and discrimination (Mirzazadeh, Nedjat, Navadeh, Haghdoost, Mansournia, Mcfaland & Mohammad, 2013). Sex workers are vulnerable to sexual violence due to the nature of their work. Research suggest that for female sex workers, rates of sexual violence are higher than for the general population (Lea et al., 2016).

### **Prostitution Leads to Lower Health Outcomes**

Drawing on the human rights perspective, arguments focus on the right of sex workers to have employment protections like any other profession (Farvid & Glass, 2014). Sex workers are among the highest risk groups for all the serious diseases. In addition, prostitutes who contract tuberculosis, infections, cancer, ovarian dysplasia, psychosis, multitudes of psychological and emotional diseases, cirrhosis and other diseases that are common amongst prostitutes, do not have access to good healthcare.

Human sexuality is an unchanging universal of human existence. However, sexual cultures and customs vary substantially from country to country and over time (Hakim, 2015). The medical perspective usually entails a narrow and restrictive focus on AIDS awareness and relevant practice, instead of obtaining a broad picture of sexual desire and its expression (Hakim, 2015). Since sex work is an important driver of HIV transmission, sex workers are feared and

marginalized, and face widespread discrimination. This reduces their participation in HIV prevention programs and their ability to access health, legal, and social assistance (Burton et al., 2010).

The HIV epidemic in countries of the Middle East and North Africa appears to be rising (Mirzazadeh et al., 2013). In Iran, people who engage in sex work and sex outside the marriage face severe penalties which affects the prevention response and makes it extremely difficult to fill gaps in knowledge about HIV and preventive and testing for disease (Mirzazadeh et al., 2013). Giving sex workers more rights, and the tools they need to protect themselves, retard the spread of HIV in countries of the Middle East. Therefore, interventions to respond to HIV and sex work in humanitarian setting are both necessary and feasible (Burton et al., 2010).

Resourcing Health and Education in the Sex Industry (RhED) uses a social model of health that incorporates harm minimization, health promotion, social inclusion, and community participation approaches to promote physical, emotional, and social health and wellbeing for sex workers (Tenni, Carpenter, & Thomson, 2015). This is a program that may be a model for both kinds of culture; that is, a culture which prohibits, as well as a culture that legalizes prostitution. If so, it demands further study. Legalizing and taxing prostitution could reduce the total number by comparison with laissez- faire but not prohibition. Therefore, legalization can be more effective than prohibition in reducing harm (Immordino & Russo, 2015).

### **Sex Trafficking versus Prostitution**

Nevertheless, the legalization of prostitution may have a disturbing result because it has been shown that legalized prostitution increases sex trafficking. Whether one believes that legalizing prostitution has a positive or negative affect on society, there appears to be a positive correlation between legalized prostitution and human sex trafficking. Sex trafficking is a

commercial sex act induced by force, fraud or coercion (U.S Department of State, 2000). Women are kidnapped, or lied to by someone about a job, but instead of that job the woman is forced into prostitution without her consent. Most people can agree on the harmfulness of sex trafficking. Sex trafficking is the process that delivers victims into prostitution (Hughes, 2004). Sex trafficking is involuntary, while prostitution is voluntary.

It is incredible how different societies react when faced with questions involving human sex trafficking. During 1999 and 2000, in Vienna, Austria, 120 countries participated in debates over a definition of trafficking (Leuchtag, 2003). The points of argument were that persons being trafficked should be divided into those who are forced and those who give their consent. The burden of proof was placed on persons being trafficked. The richest and most stable countries, such as Canada, Spain, Japan and United Kingdom, argued that the less explicit means of control over trafficked persons, such as abuse of a victim 's vulnerability, not be included in the definition of trafficking and that the term "exploitation" not be used (Leuchtag, 2003). On the other hand, countries, such as Algeria, Egypt, Pakistan, Syria, Bangladesh and France, maintained that trafficking cannot be separated from prostitution and that people being trafficked should not be divided into those who are forced and those who give their consent because trafficked persons are in no position to give meaningful consent (Leuchtag, 2003).

Conversely, what most people refer to as "prostitution" can also be seen as domestic trafficking. "Casual prostitution," prostitution in which a woman with apparent options enters of her own volition, accounts for only about one percent of the women in the sex industry. Sex trafficking and prostitution overlap in fundamental ways. Those targeted for commercial sexual exploitation share key demographic characteristics: poverty, youth, minority status in the country of exploitation, histories of abuse, and little family support (Farley, 2003). It has been observed

that the antitrafficking lobby has not only encouraged the demonization of both prostitution and trafficking but also, in the process systematically blurred the distinction between the two (Vanwesenbeeck, 2012).

### **Sex Tourism in the Middle East**

Jordan is known for sex tourism within the Middle East. Prostitution in Jordan is technically illegal but in practice, tolerated, with authorities turning a blind eye to the act. Prostitution occurs mainly in the larger cities and around refugee camps. It occurs in brothels, night clubs, massage parlors, restaurants, and on the street. The prostitutes are mainly from Russia, Ukraine, the Philippines, Morocco, Tunisia, Syria, Iraq, and Palestine, as well some Jordanians. Prostitution in Jordan is illegal and punishable by up to three years in jail. Foreign women and men found guilty can be deported (Halaby, 2013). In the capital, Amman, there are red-light district areas. One of the major streets in Amman has been commonly called "Tallaini Street" meaning "the pick me up street." Local residents have tried to stop prostitution in the area. In 2007, in an attempt to limit the number of prostitutes in Jordan, Jordan's Ministry of Interior announced a special visa scheme for women aged 17–40 travelling alone from Ukraine, Estonia, Russia, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Belarus, Uzbekistan, and Armenia. However, widespread protests from the tourism industry resulted in the scheme being withdrawn.

In fact, according to information provided under the law "Crimes Against Public Morals and Ethics" in Jordan, there was a steady increase in the number of cases of prostitution between 2013 and 2017. For example, there were 71 cases of prostitution in 2013; 67 cases of prostitution in 2014; 71 cases of prostitution in 2015; 82 cases of prostitution in 2016; and in 2017 the

number jumped to 103 cases of prostitution. This increase may be due to the fact that Jordan opened its borders to a large number of refugees between 2016-2017.

### **Methodology**

The primary purpose of the current research was to determine Jordanian citizens' perceptions regarding the legalization of female prostitution. Data were collected using an online survey, administered through Qualtrics, which examines the opinions of Jordanian citizens regarding the legalization of prostitution in the Middle East. The online questionnaire consists of 20 mostly closed-ended questions (see Appendix A for questionnaire). Several questions were measured using a Likert-type scale where participants were asked how strongly he/she agrees with the following statements:

Legalizing prostitution reduces incidents of rape and sexual abuse.

Legalizing prostitution decreases the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV.

Legalizing prostitution helps stimulate the economy through income tax revenue.

Legalizing prostitution reduces the power and control of pimps in the lives of sex workers.

Legalizing prostitution provides greater protection against violence and exploitation.

Legalizing prostitution provides sex workers with access to better health care.

Legalizing prostitution provides sex workers with greater legal protections.

Legalizing prostitution leads to a proliferation of sex trafficking across the globe.

Legalizing prostitution decreases the social stigma associated with sex work.

The questions targeted the opinions of Jordanian citizens who are living in the United States. Their opinions were then analyzed for commonalities related to the legalization of prostitution.

### Results

The total sample size was 31 participants who were Jordanian citizens currently living in the United States. Most of the participants were fairly young between 35 and 44 years old. Sixty-seven percent of participants were male. Approximately 63% were married and have been living in the United States between 2 to 40 years.

Results suggest that 84.85% of participants are aware that prostitution exists in Jordan. Of the 54% of participants who answered “yes” to the question as to whether there is prostitution in their native country, 18% said that prostitution was illegal in Jordan. Participants were asked to explain why prostitution was illegal in Jordan. Most agree that it was Haram (i.e. prohibited in the Islamic religion) and does not preserve Middle Eastern culture. Participants reported that the primary reasons someone engages in prostitution are poverty, traumatic experiences, and domestic violence.

Participants were divided on whether prostitution should be legalized in United States. Seventy-four percent opposed and strongly opposed legalization. On the other hand, twenty-two percent of participants advocated legalizing prostitution in Jordan which seems to match their opinions with respect to the United States. Sixty-seven percent of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that legalizing prostitution would reduce incidents of rape and sexual abuse. Seventy-one percent of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that legalizing prostitution decreases the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV. When asked whether legalizing prostitution helps stimulate the economy through income tax revenue, seventy-four percent disagreed or strongly disagreed. When asked whether legalizing prostitution reduces the power and control of pimps in the lives of sex workers, fifty-nine disagreed or strongly disagreed. Surprisingly, only twenty-nine percent agreed or strongly agreed that legalizing

prostitution provides greater protection against violence and exploitation. There were also large differences in participants who disagreed and agreed that legalizing prostitution provides sex workers with access to better health care (70% versus 30% respectively).

If prostitution were legalized, fifty percent agreed or strongly agreed this will lead to greater legal protections. Sixty- five percent agreed or strongly agreed that legalization will result a proliferation of sex trafficking across the globe. Another common theme was the fact that social stigma exists regardless of the system in Jordan, but manifests differently based upon social context. In Jordan, sex work is illegal and at same time is tolerated. But according to Jordanian citizens, it is still not considered an acceptable business. For example, seventy- seven percent of participants disagreed or strongly disagreed that legalizing prostitution decreases the social stigma associated while the rest agree/ strongly agree. Seventy -four percent opposed or strongly opposed supporting the legalization of prostitution in the United States, and seventy- eight percent of the participants opposed or strongly opposed the legalization of prostitution in Jordan.

Table 1: Support for the Legalization of Prostitution

| Statement  | Support | Oppose |
|--|---------|--------|
| How strongly do you support the legalization of prostitution in the United States?   | 26%     | 74%    |
| How strongly do you support the legalization of prostitution in your native country? | 22%     | 78%    |

\*Please note that the “Support” column is comprised of “Support” and “Strongly Support” responses and the “Oppose” column is comprised of “Oppose” and “Strongly Oppose” responses.

Table 2. Do You Agree with the Following Statements?

| Statements  | Agree | Disagree |
|---|-------|----------|
| Legalizing prostitution reduces incidents of rape and sexual abuse                                | 33%   | 67%      |
| Legalizing prostitution decreases the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV. | 30%   | 71%      |
| Legalizing prostitution helps stimulate the economy through income tax revenue.                   | 26%   | 74%      |
| Legalizing prostitution reduces the power and control of pimps in the lives of sex workers.       | 41%   | 59%      |
| Legalizing prostitution provides greater protection against violence and exploitation.            | 29%   | 71%      |
| Legalizing prostitution provides sex workers with access to better health care.                   | 29%   | 70%      |
| Legalizing prostitution provides sex workers with greater legal protections.                      | 50%   | 50%      |
| Legalizing prostitution leads to a proliferation of sex trafficking across the globe.             | 65%   | 35%      |
| Legalizing prostitution decreases the social stigma associated with sex work.                     | 23%   | 77%      |

\* Please note that the “Agree” column is comprised of “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” responses and the “Disagree” column is comprised of “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” responses.

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this research was to gain a better understanding of the opinions of Jordanian citizens who live in United States concerning the legalization of female prostitution. Prostitution is a very complex topic. As can be seen from the results of the questionnaire, opinions vary substantially. This seems to be because the attitudes concerning prostitution and the respondent's awareness of the consequences of legalization vary greatly. Due to the preliminary nature of the current study, some limitations should be considered before the findings can be generalized to the general population. The limitations of this study include limited time and resources, small sample size, the representativeness of a sample, and response bias.

The social and religious context from which the participants in this study draw their conclusions is very different, so it is expected that they perceive the sex industry through different lenses. However, prostitution has existed since ancient times and can be found in every sizable human society. This should be enough of an indicator that eradication is not possible; therefore, criminalization is not an adequate approach to the industry. Findings from this study regarding Jordanian attitudes about prostitution indicate that the majority of respondents believe that prostitution should be not legalized. The labeling of sex workers in a very negative way further victimizes those who are forced into the industry, making it difficult to integrate prostitutes into "normal life." The impact of social stigma cannot be stressed enough. Although prostitution exists in Jordan, a large percentage of study participants denied that fact.

The strength of the research was designed to elicit deeply felt opinions from Jordanian citizens about a subject that is prohibited to discuss. I was able, after very substantial effort and quite often resistance, to begin the process of acquainting Jordanians who refuse to acknowledge

the enormity of the problem in Jordan and around the world. This study draws much needed attention to alternative opinions on the legalization of prostitution. Varying opinions illustrate that this is not a simple topic, and no system is perfect. Ultimately, the issues surrounding female prostitution are complex and deserve a wider lens that incorporates a variety of perspectives that recognize this complexity. Future research should be more objective in exploring these complexities and not limited by personal opinion or public perceptions of morality. Hopefully, future research will help to develop government policies that will be aimed at helping those in the sex trades to alleviate the negative consequences of their activities and help them rise to better lives.

The United States has opened its borders to persons from all countries and those persons must acknowledged and be educated on global problems, such as those presented in this paper. Furthermore, they must become aware of the detrimental consequences of problems such as sex trafficking and prostitution. But these problems are not well understood and are often met with prejudice and close mindedness. Although persons, such as Jordanian citizens who live in the U.S, may still carry the stigmas and stereotypes of their upbringings and their cultural and religious educations, they must be encouraged to face the problems realistically and be open to discuss the issues involved. Through open discussion and consideration of issues that are currently “silenced,” these people may alter perceptions and provide solutions not only for those in the United States but also for those in their native country as well. It is hoped that one day a full and open discussion of issues, such as the one presented in the paper, will help to resolve serious global concerns regarding prostitution and sex trafficking.

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**Appendix A**

Q 1 Where is your native country?

Q 2 Do you have prostitution in your native country?

Q 3 Is prostitution legal in your native country?

Q 4 If not, why do you believe it is not legal?

Q 5 In your opinion, what is the primary reason why someone engages in prostitution?

Q 6 How strongly do you support the legalization of prostitution in the United States?

Q 7 How strongly do you support the legalization of prostitution in your native country?

Q 8 Legalizing prostitution reduces incidents of rape and sexual abuse

Q 9 Legalizing prostitution decreases the transmission of sexually transmitted diseases, such as HIV.

Q 10 Legalizing prostitution helps stimulate the economy through income tax revenue.

Q 11 Legalizing prostitution reduces the power and control of pimps in the lives of sex workers.

Q 12 Legalizing prostitution provides greater protection against violence and exploitation.

Q 13 Legalizing prostitution provides sex workers with access to better health care.

Q 14 Legalizing prostitution provides sex workers with greater legal protections

Q 15 Legalizing prostitution leads to a proliferation of sex trafficking across the globe.

Q 16 Legalizing prostitution decreases the social stigma associated with sex work.

Q 17 What is your age?

Q 18 What gender do you identify with?

Q 19 What is your marital status?

Q 20 How long you have been living in the United States?