**Discontinued Mobilization for Swedish Sex Workers’ Rights: The Ambivalence of Civil Rights Organizations in Sweden**

The introduction of the Sex Purchase Act in Sweden in 1999 marked a pivotal moment in the governance of sex work, framing the purchase of sexual services as an act of violence against women and criminalizing buyers. From its inception, the policy has faced criticism for failing to protect sex workers' rights, particularly from advocates who emphasize decriminalization as the only framework ensuring the safety and autonomy of sex workers. This article examines the ambivalence and inconsistent responses of two major Swedish NGOs—RFSU (the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education) and RFSL (the Swedish Federation for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex Rights)—toward the Nordic Model’s impact on Swedish sex workers, particularly transgender people and people living with HIV, who are disproportionately represented within the sex work community.

The analysis focuses on two critical moments in 2015 and 2019 when RFSU and RFSL publicly declared their support for the decriminalization of sex work. These declarations provoked significant backlash from government representatives, Swedish society, and their own membership bases, leading to a subsequent period characterized by perceived neutrality and inaction. This tendency is examined through the broader concepts of “strategic neutrality” and “diplomatic advocacy,” exploring how these NGOs navigate tensions between their principles of bodily autonomy and sexual and reproductive health rights (SRHR), the Swedish government’s official policy, and alignment with international bodies such as ILGA and the World Health Organization, both of which support decriminalization.

Content and discourse analysis of RFSU and RFSL’s official websites, social media profiles, and media coverage is used to explore their actions, inaction, and ambivalence regarding the Sex Purchase Act. The study highlights the broader implications of this ambivalence and if the failure to take a consistent stance allows anti-sex work alliances to dominate the narrative and strengthens the Sex Purchase Act’s role as a tool for harm and injustice toward sex workers. Research findings show that the law has been used to ban entry and deport migrant sex workers, including those living with HIV, LGBTIQ individuals, and others reliant on SRHR initiatives.

Lastly, the study interrogates how the ambivalence regarding the Sex Purchase Act aligns or contrasts with recent advocacy efforts. In 2024, RFSU and RFSL publicly criticized the proposed Angiverilagen in Sweden, a law requiring the reporting and deportation of undocumented people. As noted, the Sex Purchase Act has long been used as a deportation mechanism, affecting not only those who are undocumented but also asylum seekers and people with temporary residence permits, including EU citizens. This relational perspective evaluates how the strategies of RFSU and RFSL evolve in response to shifting sociopolitical landscapes. By employing a poststructuralist theoretical framework drawing on Foucault, Saussure, and Hall, the aim is to critically assess how RFSU and RFSL’s ambivalent positionalities reflect and reinforce broader discourses surrounding sex work, justice, and rights in Sweden.