"Why Norway banned the purchase of sexual services: Ideas and prostitution policy"

After decades of debate, the Norwegian parliament criminalized the purchase of sexual services, but not the sale, in 2008. Proponents and critics of the ban, as well as many scholars, have maintained that Norway followed in the footsteps of Sweden, which in 1999, became the first state to adopt legislation prohibiting the purchase of sexual services. However, as we argue in this paper, the two policies may be broadly similar, yet the underlying rationale for their adoption was quite different.

While the issue of a sex purchase ban has been on the agenda for over three decades in Norway, bringing together a makeshift coalition of radical feminists and Christian conservatives, proponents have consistently failed to achieve legislative success. Yet, since 2006, the presence of Nigerian street prostitutes in Oslo has generated intense media coverage and substantial public outrage. Against this backdrop, entrepreneurs discovered an increasingly receptive environment for calls to criminalize the purchase of sex.

Drawing on a broad range of constructivist and ideational literature in both international relations and comparative politics, we detail how the Norwegian ban resulted from policy entrepreneurs drawing upon especially salient ideas regarding transnational trafficking in order to achieve legislative success. This stands in sharp contrast to the Swedish case, which stemmed from an elite political consensus that viewed a ban as a necessary step in the battle for increased gender equality. While ideas are an important tool for achieving policy change, different ideas are necessary in different national contexts, even when agents seek similar policy outcomes.