



Predicting Attitudes Towards the Exchange of Sexual Services for Payment: Variance in Gender Gaps Across the Nordic Countries

Isabelle Johansson^{1,2} · Michael A. Hansen³

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Abstract

Introduction This article explores how individual-level attitudes towards the exchange of sexual services for payment differ between the Nordic countries. The sparse existing research points to gender and general attitudes towards sexual behavior as powerful predictors of attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment. However, there are no previous research agendas that attempt to explain variance in such attitudes including all the Nordic countries.

Methods We estimate regression models utilizing data from the joint Wave 5 European Values Study (EVS)/World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (EVS 2017; WVS, 2020) asking about the acceptability of prostitution to predict attitudes towards the exchange of sexual services for payment in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden.

Results The findings point to considerable variation in attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment in the Nordic countries. The attitudinal differences align with how the different Nordic governments have approached the issue at hand. Moreover, the results suggest that gender and attitudes towards non-committal casual sex play a critical role in determining attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment. The impact of attitudes towards non-committal casual sex on attitudes towards the acceptability of exchanging sex for payment is different for women when compared to men in four of the five countries.

Conclusions The empirical results provide convincing evidence that women are less likely than men to translate liberal attitudes towards general sexual behavior into lenient attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment.

Policy Implications The results indicate that government policies play a crucial role in shaping public attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment, and policymakers should consider the potential impact of their stance on the issue. Policymakers and others who want to shift attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment in the Nordic region should be cognizant of their interconnectedness with gender and attitudes towards non-committal casual sex.

Keywords Sex work · Prostitution · Public attitudes · Gender gaps · Nordic countries

Introduction

Over the past two decades, various actors have attended to questions concerning the exchange of sexual services for payment, including governments, national and international organizations, and influential companies (Brooks-Gordon et al., 2021; Skilbrei, 2019). A move towards a

more liberal treatment of commercial sex that centers around decriminalization and sex workers' rights is observable in Belgium, New Zealand, the Netherlands, South Africa, and parts of Australia (Armstrong, 2016; Maciotti et al., 2023; Richter et al., 2022; Skilbrei, 2019). Still, prostitution policies that seek to restrict and repress the trade in sex prevail around the world (Östergren, 2020; Escot et al., 2022; Sanders, O'Neill et al., 2017; Skilbrei, 2019). Measures that target sex trade participants by means of control and punishment have been justified through various religious, social, and medical notions throughout history. The common denominator has been an understanding of the exchange of sex for payment as fundamentally negative and threatening to society. Certain feminist-oriented perspectives share this understanding, linking commercial sex to gender inequality and men's violence against women. In

✉ Isabelle Johansson
isabelle.johansson@hkr.se

¹ Department of Social Sciences, Kristianstad University, Kristianstad, Sweden

² Department of Sociology, Lund University, Lund, Sweden

³ Department of Philosophy, Contemporary History & Political Science, University of Turku/Turun Yliopisto, Turku, Finland

the Nordic region, the Swedish government has presented client criminalization as a progressive and original feminist measure by deploying this framework (Johansson, 2022; Östergren, 2018, 2020).

Meanwhile, developments in digital media and information technology have changed the exchange of sex for payment significantly, giving rise to new forms of sex work (Cunningham et al., 2018; Sanders, O'Neill et al., 2017; Sanders, Scoular et al., 2018). Nowadays, people provide different forms of sexual content and services for payment on various digital platforms (Laurin, 2019; Sanders et al., 2016; Swords et al., 2023). While the prevalence of virtual sex work has increased (Nelson et al., 2020; Rubattu et al., 2023), popular websites like OnlyFans and social media apps like Instagram and Snapchat have started censoring sex work-related content, including sex worker activism (Are, 2022; Rouse & Salter, 2021).

A timely research topic in this context of conflicting trends is public attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment. This is a limited research field with few existing studies, several of which date many years back and do not account for important societal changes (Escot et al., 2022; Hansen & Johansson, 2022, 2023; Johansson & Hansen, 2023a, b; Power et al., 2023; Vlase & Grasso, 2023; Yan et al., 2018; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Immordino & Russo, 2015, Kotsadam & Jakobsson, 2011, 2014; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Valor-Segura et al., 2011; Räsaänen & Wilska, 2007, Lo & Wei, 2005; Basow & Campanile, 1990; Cotton et al., 2002; May, 1999; Peracca et al., 1998; Cosby et al., 1996). Public attitudes towards morally and politically delicate issues like the exchange of sex for payment are important to understand for several reasons. People who exchange sex for payment are likely to experience discrimination and stigmatization where there is widespread negativity in the public and the dominant narrative is one of condemnation and shame. If a large share of the public condemns the activity and supports its criminalization, law- and policymakers may be more likely to adopt, maintain, or strengthen laws against it—thus, potentially exacerbating stigma and discrimination.

Research on public attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment is especially scarce as far as important attitudinal differences are concerned, with gender gaps being one notable understudied area. A recent study by Hansen and Johansson (2022) found gender to be a powerful predictor of individual-level attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment in Denmark, where women hold more negative attitudes than men. They further found general attitudes towards sexual behavior to be the largest predictor of views on the acceptability of exchanging sex for payment. Also here, the authors uncover notable gender differences. Men who view non-committal casual sex as completely acceptable are on average twice as likely as women to view the

exchange of sex for payment as completely acceptable. The authors theorize that men's more positive attitudes stem from them not associating the trade in sex with negative societal implications to the same extent as women. Another reason may be that the sex industry largely caters to men. In contrast, women may view paid sex more negatively due to associations like unequal power relations and men's violence against women. As a result, women distinguish their attitudes towards paid sex from their attitudes towards general sexual behavior.

The relationship between gender and individual-level attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment warrants further attention since the existing studies are few. Gender is pertinent to sex work in many ways, and gender issues play a prominent role in contemporary discussions about the sex industry. Women and marginalized genders make up a large share of the sex worker population, and their clients are generally men. Sex workers also draw on gendered stereotypes when marketing their services (Abel, 2023; Kulick, 1998; Sanders, 2005). This gendered dynamic can create power imbalances and contribute to the perpetuation of traditional gender roles, leading to negative societal attitudes towards sex workers and their work. Gender influences not only the ways in which sex workers are perceived and treated but also the risks and challenges they face, including violence and lack of legal protection. Gender-based stereotypes and prejudices may shape public perceptions of sex work and contribute to the stigmatization and marginalization of sex workers. Changes to the way we approach the sex industry are nowadays seen as imperative in moving towards a gender-equal society, but perspectives diverge, especially in terms of policy. Some argue that gender inequality will persist for as long as the sex trade exists, while others regard the realization of sex workers' rights as a necessary step towards achieving gender equality (Skilbrei, 2019; Sanders, O'Neill et al., 2017).

The debate over the sex industry's legitimacy is complex. There are those who cite sexual freedom and the notion that consenting adults should have the autonomy to make choices about their bodies and sexual activities without government interference as a fundamental argument in its favor. Others find that the claim for sexual freedom is often rendered meaningless by the harsh realities and pressures many individuals in the industry face. Sex workers' rights advocates have increasingly shifted away from such discussions. Instead, they focus on broader structural inequalities, including gender-based discrimination and human rights violations, while emphasizing the importance of supporting sex workers' rights and protection, irrespective of the origins of their involvement in the industry.

Another understudied area is that of cross-national comparisons. While public attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment are likely to differ between countries,

only a small number of comparative studies have been conducted (Immordino & Russo, 2015; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Kotsadam & Jakobsson, 2014; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011). Cross-national comparisons can provide important insight into how attitudes towards the trade in sex interact with attitudes towards other societal issues, like gender and general sexual behavior (Hansen & Johansson, 2022). One area of interest in this regard is the Nordic region, that is, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. The Nordic states make up a good sample for comparing people's attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment, given their many similar characteristics. These countries share a welfare state form that has been described as the “Nordic model,” characterized by strong government institutions and public sectors providing social safety and welfare services, high levels of social trust and gender equality, and a widespread presence of female legislators and influential women's organizations (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2014). Moreover, there are notable similarities to consider in terms of how the respective governments approach the exchange of sex for payment. There are also important differences between the countries which are likely to be reflected in public attitudes.

In this paper, we ask how individual-level attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment differ between the Nordic countries. To our knowledge, this is the first cross-national comparison of public attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment including all the Nordic countries. To conduct the analysis, we utilize data from the joint Wave 5 European Values Study (EVS)/World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 (EVS, 2017; WVS, 2020). The data for Denmark is the same as in Hansen and Johansson (2022), but the data for Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden has not been utilized in previous studies on the topic. The survey asked respondents “to what degree do you think prostitution is acceptable?”

Most of the existing studies looking at individual-level attitudes towards the exchange of sex services for payment are based on survey questions using the term “prostitution” (Basow & Campanile, 1990; Cosby et al., 1996; Escot et al., 2022; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; May, 1999; Peracca et al., 1998; Räsaänen & Wilska, 2007; Valor-Segura et al., 2011; Vlase & Grasso, 2023; Yan et al., 2018), with a few exceptions (Hansen & Johansson, 2023; Johansson & Hansen, 2023a, b; Powers et al., 2023; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011). Here, we use prostitution when directly discussing the survey question and the results, but also deploy alternative terms, e.g., “sex work,” “commercial sex,” and “the trade in sex.” The different terms we use are not perfectly synonymous. As Hansen and Johansson (2023) demonstrate, different terms prompt different associations; when assigned a question using the term prostitution, respondents are more likely to translate negative associations with the exchange of sexual services for

payment into unacceptability than when assigned questions using sex work or transactional sex. What the terms have in common is that they refer to the exchange of sex for payment. With regard to our position, we acknowledge the often moralizing and stigmatizing nature of the prostitution term and find that sex work is a useful alternative to signal that the exchange of sex for payment can be legitimate work. It is also worth noting that respondents may be more inclined to associate the term prostitution with women on the selling side. Male sex work has historically been awarded less focus in media and public discourse and, when discussed, it has generally been labeled with other terms. Implicit biases relating to terminology and gender are important to keep in mind as they can influence perceptions of acceptability.

The other key item in the main dependent variable is “acceptable.” We acknowledge that the term “acceptability” is subject to interpretation. Respondents may be considering their views of the ethical, moral, and personal choices of the individuals who engage in the act of exchanging sexual services for payment, encompassing both sex workers and their clients or only one of these parties. Respondents might also be contemplating societal responses, as in how governments should approach these exchanges in terms of policy. While we cannot discern the exact interpretation of acceptability for each respondent, the consistency of our findings across the surveyed countries suggests that the analysis reflects a meaningful representation of public attitudes towards the exchange of sexual services for payment. Relatedly, Hansen and Johansson (2023) find that acceptability plays a central role in shaping public perceptions of the exchange of sex for payment, including which sexual activities people associate with such exchanges.

Sex Work in Context—Comparing the Nordic Countries

Besides describing a welfare state form, the “Nordic model” has been used to describe the criminalization of sex workers' clients (Escot et al., 2022; Kingston & Thomas, 2019; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2011; Vuolajärvi, 2019). The notion of a shared model stems from the fact that clients have been criminalized to varying degrees in several of the Nordic countries, albeit not all. While the Nordic countries have a long history of inter-governmental cooperation, they have not agreed on a common policy approach to the exchange of sex for payment. There is no such thing as a unified Nordic model of prostitution policy, which the works of several scholars testify to (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2014; Danna, 2012; Dodillet, 2009; Erikson, 2017; Holmström & Skilbrei, 2017; Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Östergren, 2021; Kingston & Thomas, 2019; Kulick, 2003, 2005; Skilbrei, 2019; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2011; Vuolajärvi, 2019; Östergren, 2018, 2020). That said, there are important similarities to consider

between the Nordic countries in terms of how the respective governments treat the exchange of sex for payment, as well as notable differences that are likely to be expressed in public attitudes towards this issue.

Full client criminalization has been adopted in Sweden, Norway, and Iceland, meaning the mere act of paying someone for sex constitutes a crime in these three countries. Sweden was the first Nordic country to criminalize clients in 1999, and this approach is sometimes referred to as the “Swedish model.” Iceland and Norway followed suit and criminalized clients a decade later. Norway took it a step further and made it a punishable offense for Norwegians to pay for sex while abroad, regardless of the laws of the countries they visit. In Finland, partial client criminalization has been adopted in that it is a crime to solicit someone for sex services in public and to knowingly engage in paid sex relations with individuals who have been procured or trafficked, but consensual exchanges of sex for payment in private have not been criminalized. Denmark is the one country in the region where no aspect of paying for sex has been criminalized (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2014; Danna, 2012; Järvinen & Henriksen, 2020; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2011; Vuolajärvi, 2019; Östergren, 2018, 2020). Conversely, in 1999, Denmark considered granting sex workers legal protection in line with other professions, thus moving towards a so-called integrative policy approach (Östergren, 2020) towards the exchange of sex for payment, but the decision did not materialize. Denmark has not recognized sex work as a profession, meaning sex workers are not entitled to unemployment benefits (Kofod et al., 2011).

Taken together, Denmark and Finland currently stand out as the most tolerant of the Nordic countries in that consenting adult citizens who engage in paid sexual relations are not criminalized in these countries. That said, in Denmark, Finland, and Sweden, some migrants risk deportation if the authorities suspect that they have or are planning to engage in sex work. Another discernable similarity across the Nordic region is the criminalization of “third parties,” that is, people who assist, benefit from, intermediate, and organize the paid sexual relations of others (Skilbrei, 2019; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2011; Vuolajärvi, 2019). The term “third party” is broad and can include, for instance, assistants, brothel managers, drivers, escort agencies, landlords, receptionists, website moderators, and pimps, as in those who control and arrange clients for sex workers against a share of their earnings. The relationship between sex workers and third parties can be consensual or exploitative (Horning & Marcus, 2017; Weitzer, 2007). Sex workers can also act as third parties if they facilitate the work of other sex workers. Due to the criminalization of third parties, brothel-like operations tend to be covert in the Nordic countries. Denmark and Finland are somewhat of an exception in this regard in that they have more overt commercial sex venues in public than the other Nordic

countries. While there are no official brothels, sexual services are provided in erotic massage parlors in Finland and in so-called “clinics” in Denmark (Järvinen & Henriksen, 2020). In the other Nordic countries, paid sexual relations are confined to covert venues, including private homes, hotel rooms, and non-erotic massages parlors. Given the relative lenience of the Danish and Finnish governments, we expect Danes and Finns to be more accepting of the exchange of sex for payment than Icelanders, Norwegians, and Swedes.

Another notable contrast between the Nordic countries is the differing role gender issues have played in shaping their current prostitution policies, with Sweden standing out as the place where gender inequality has been emphasized the most. In fact, the Swedish government has been particularly forceful in its campaign against the sex trade, framing prostitution as an issue of gender and power inequality, and clients as responsible for perpetuating men’s violence against women, sexual exploitation, and human trafficking. Countering the demand for sexual services has even been described as a government priority. In no other Nordic country have governments engaged in such forceful stigmatizing campaigns against clients as in Sweden (Bucken-Knapp et al., 2014; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Östergren, 2021; Kingston & Thomas, 2019; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2011; Vuolajärvi, 2019; Östergren, 2018). Notably, in 2022, Sweden raised the minimum sentence for paying for sex from an income-based fine to imprisonment for a maximum of 1 year - a change that highlights the stigmatized status of clients in contemporary Sweden.

Punitive measures targeting sex trade participants are obviously nothing new. The decision to criminalize clients should be seen as the strengthening of the repressive Swedish prostitution policy in a long history of treating commercial sex as a threat to society (Östergren, 2018). The novelty is rather that the Swedish government has managed to label client criminalization as a progressive and original feminist measure, by deploying the framework of the exchange of sex for payment as men’s violence against women. Indeed, measures aimed at eradicating the sex trade have played a prominent role in the broader Swedish gender equality project, and Sweden has invested significant resources in promoting client criminalization as a successful approach for other governments to follow. The Swedish campaign against the sex trade has been impactful. Governments from all over the world have looked to Sweden for inspiration when reforming their prostitution policies (Johansson, 2022; Johansson & Östergren, 2021; Kingston & Thomas, 2019; Kulick, 2003, 2005; Östergren, 2018; Skilbrei & Holmström, 2011; Vuolajärvi, 2019). Attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment are an important area of inquiry in this regard. Studies show that negativity towards sex work has adverse effects on sex workers’ lives (Benoit et al., 2018; Kingston & Thomas,

2019; Östergren, 2018; Platt et al., 2018; Vuolajärvi, 2019). Sweden's aggressive campaign against clients and the narrative of paid sex as a threat to gender equality is likely to resonate in public attitudes towards this issue.

Attitudes Towards Sexual Behavior, Sex Work, and Gender Gaps

The available research on individual-level attitudes towards the exchange of sexual services for payment is limited but growing. In explaining differing degrees of acceptability, studies have ascribed varying importance to age, education, gender, and attitudes towards conservatism, liberalism, feminism, gender equality, women in general, immigration, privacy, and religiosity, as well as general sexual behavior (Basow & Campanile, 1990; Cosby et al., 1996; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Kuosmanen, 2011; Lo & Wei, 2005; May, 1999; Peracca et al., 1998; Powers et al., 2023; Räsaänen & Wilska, 2007; Valor-Segura et al., 2011; Vlase & Grasso, 2023; Yan et al., 2018). Scholars have also looked at the relationship between legal approaches towards trading sexual services and public attitudes (Powers et al., 2023; Immordino & Russo, 2015; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Kotsadam & Jakobsson, 2014). Only one study has assessed the impact of survey question wording on attitudes, comparing “prostitution,” “sex work,” and “transactional sex” (Hansen & Johansson, 2023).

It is difficult to discern clear trends in the attitudinal literature, given the limited research that has been done. That said, studies show that women tend to evaluate the exchange of sexual services for payment more negatively than men (Basow & Campanile, 1990; Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Kuosmanen, 2011; Lo & Wei, 2005; May, 1999; Räsaänen & Wilska, 2007; Yan et al., 2018). Studies have also found that women indicate stronger support for punitive measures against sex workers and their clients than men (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Kuosmanen, 2011). Hansen and Johansson (2022) note that gender seems to be the one sociodemographic variable that follows a clear pattern in the literature. This observation resonates with studies on attitudes towards other sexual practices, such as pornography, which also demonstrate significant gender gaps (Lykke & Cohen, 2015; Petersen & Shibley Hyde, 2011). Narratives about the exchange of sex for payment as gender inequality and women's exploitation have become common (Kulig & Butler, 2019) and may contribute to women's increased negativity (Hansen & Johansson, 2022).

Scholars have suggested that people's attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment are influenced by the legal status of the sex industry (Escot et al., 2022; Immordino & Russo, 2015). A lenient approach from the government towards the trade in

sex will result in higher variability of opinions but overall resonate in more tolerant attitudes (Immordino & Russo, 2015). Oppositely, a strict stance centered around criminalization has been linked to increased negativity (Escot et al., 2022). Studies have found notable differences in public attitudes towards this issue when comparing Sweden, Norway, and Denmark (Hansen & Johansson, 2022; Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011), but thus far, no study has looked at all the Nordic countries comparatively.

In Denmark, where consenting adult citizens who engage in paid sexual relations are not criminalized, Hansen and Johansson (2022) find that the majority of respondents (54%) hold negative attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment. Meanwhile, there were significant differences between men and women, with men holding more positive attitudes than women. One study comparing individual-level attitudes towards the act of paying for sex in Denmark, Norway, Sweden, the UK, Spain, the Netherlands, France, and Germany identifies Norwegians and Swedes as less tolerant of this practice than people living in countries where clients have not been criminalized, Denmark included (Jonsson & Jakobsson, 2017). Jonsson and Jakobsson (2017) appear to have found important differences between men and women, with women overall holding more negative attitudes towards paying for sex than men in all three Nordic countries, but they do not discuss this gender gap at any depth. An earlier study identified higher levels of negativity towards “buying and selling sex” among Swedes when compared to Norwegians (Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011). Jakobsson and Kotsadam (2011) go further in exploring gender differences in their comparison between attitudes in Norway and Sweden. They find that men are on average more accepting of both the buying and selling of sex than women. They also find that support for gender equality correlates with higher degrees of negativity, more so in Sweden than in Norway. The authors explain this difference as having to do with the gender equality frame playing a more prominent role in the Swedish prostitution debate than in Norway. It should be noted that studies point in diverging direction concerning the relationship between views on gender equality and attitudes towards the punishment of sex trade participants. In Norway and Sweden, where the act of paying for sex is fully criminalized, support for punitive measures against both clients and sex workers was correlated with support for gender equality (Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011). In Spain, however, Valor-Segura et al. (2011) found a correlation between a prohibitionist approach towards the exchange of sex for payment and negative attitudes towards women in general.

Like Hansen and Johansson (2022), Jakobsson and Kotsadam (2011) find a correlation between attitudes towards general sexual behavior and attitudes towards the buying and selling of sex in Norway and Sweden, with sexual liberals being more tolerant. Hansen and

Johansson (2022) emphasize that attitudes towards general sexual behavior are, in fact, the largest predictor of views on the acceptability of exchanging sex services for payment in Denmark. However, there is a notable gender gap to consider as far as this effect is concerned. On average, Danish men who view non-committal casual sex as completely acceptable are twice as likely as women holding the same attitude to view the exchange of sex services for payment as completely acceptable. They stipulate that women's greater negativity may be explained by their increased proneness to consider the harmful societal implications that have been associated with the sex trade, such as the perpetuation of traditional gender roles and unequal power relations between men and women, which are more likely to affect women negatively (see also: Basow & Campanile, 1990; Valor-Segura et al., 2011). In recent discussions, the perception of female sex workers as victims of exploitation has gained prominence, marking a shift from earlier characterizations of them as disreputable or immoral. Repressive policies, such as those criminalizing clients, have gained traction by framing sex work within the context of women's exploitation. Scholars have engaged in long-standing debates over whether women's engagement in sex work can even be considered an autonomous choice, with critics arguing that it inherently perpetuates exploitation, allowing men to assert control over women's bodies (Kulig & Butler, 2019). Such negative associations may explain why women in Denmark appear to make a distinction between their attitudes towards general sexual behavior and their views on the acceptability of exchanging sex services for payment (Hansen & Johansson, 2022). A sexual double standard could also be at play. Studies have found gendered difference in sexual boundary-work, which may contribute to the persistence of a sexual double standard where women are judged differently than men for liberal sexual behavior (Armstrong et al., 2014; Fjær et al., 2015). This double standard involves the practice of "slut shaming." Women themselves participate in this behavior by labeling and distancing themselves from perceived "sluttiness" in others. The sexual double standard may explain why distinguishing between general sexual liberalism and the exchange of sex for payment is particularly important for women, as they face harsher judgment for liberal sexual behavior compared to men.

Based on the findings of previous studies and the policy differences discussed earlier, we expect gender to be the most important sociodemographic predictor for individual-level attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment, with women finding it less acceptable when compared to men in all Nordic countries, but Sweden. We further expect that individual-level attitudes towards general sexual conduct are the most important attitudinal predictor, with respondents holding liberal

attitudes being more likely to find the exchange of sex services for payment acceptable across all Nordic countries. On average, liberal attitudes towards other sexual activity will have a smaller impact on women's views on the acceptability of exchanging sex services for payment when compared to men. We expect this interactive effect will be largest in Denmark and Finland, given Hansen and Johansson's (2022) findings and the relative lenience of the two countries' policies. Drawing on this argument, we expect the effect to be moderate in Iceland and Norway, while non-existent in Sweden. The reason for assuming that Sweden will be an exception in these two instances is the forceful campaign against the sex trade that has been conducted there, which actively stigmatizes clients for perpetuating issues like men's violence against women and human trafficking. This factor combined with the comparably longer time client criminalization has been around in Sweden will likely resonate in Swedes' attitudes towards the sex trade. Moreover, the joint Wave 5 EVS/WVS Wave 7 (EVS, 2017; WVS, 2020) that we use for our analysis carried out face-to-face interviews for gathering data in Sweden. It is reasonable to assume that survey respondents provided answers that are socially acceptable in the Swedish context.

Hypotheses

*H*₁: Gender is the most important sociodemographic predictor, with women finding the exchange of sex for payment less acceptable when compared to men across all Nordic countries except Sweden.

*H*₂: Attitudes towards general sexual conduct are the most important attitudinal predictor, with respondents holding liberal attitudes being more likely to find the exchange of sex for payment acceptable across all Nordic countries.

*H*₃: On average, liberal attitudes towards other sexual activity will have a smaller impact on women's views on the acceptability of exchanging sex for payment when compared to men.

*H*₄: The interactive effect will be largest in Denmark and Finland, moderate in Iceland and Norway, and non-existent in Sweden.

Data and Methodology

Data

We utilize the joint Wave 5 European Values Study (EVS)/ World Values Survey (WVS) Wave 7 to predict citizen's attitudes towards the acceptability of exchanging sex for payment in the Nordic countries (EVS, 2017; WVS, 2020). The EVS and the WVS are two large-scale, cross-national, and longitudinal survey research studies that are jointly collaborating. In particular, the EVS is responsible for planning and conducting

surveys in European countries, using the EVS questionnaire and EVS methodological guidelines. Overall, the purpose of the EVS was to investigate the values of populations in European countries on a number of issues, such as politics, family, role of society, immigration, national sentiment, morality, and belonging. While the survey was not designed specifically for the exploration we conduct here, it represents one instance in recent years where a cross-national survey dataset asks about attitudes towards prostitution in all five Nordic countries.

The survey is a random sample survey where face-to-face interviews were conducted in Sweden. In Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Norway the survey is either a face-to-face survey or a self-administered survey. Post-stratification weights were calculated and provided to account for survey sampling bias in all five countries. The study surveyed 3362 respondents in Denmark, 1199 in Finland, 1624 in Iceland, 1122 in Norway, and 1194 in Sweden. After accounting for nonresponses on important independent variables necessary for the multiple regression analyses, there are 2969 respondents represented in the models in Denmark, 1007 in Finland, 1348 in Iceland, 1013 in Norway, and 1019 in Sweden. We provide variable coding and descriptive statistics in Appendixes 1–4 for all variables of interest in the full Nordic sample and by country.

Dependent Variable

The main variable of interest assesses respondents' attitudes towards prostitution. In particular, the survey question asks respondents, "to what degree do you think prostitution is acceptable?" The scale that the respondent must place their response on ranges from 1 to 10 where 1 indicates "never" acceptable and 10 indicates "completely" acceptable. In survey research, question wording plays a potentially crucial role in impacting responses. Recognizing this fact, we acknowledge that a survey question using the term "prostitution" may elicit different responses than a question using the phrase "transactional sex" or "sex work." Therefore, since the survey specifically refers to the exchange of sex for payment by using the word "prostitution," we use this term when discussing results. In Appendix 4, we provide descriptive statistics for each country for each category of the dependent variable (1–10), a collapsed version for the dependent variable (negative 1–4, neutral 5, and positive responses 6–10), and both types of descriptive statistics with samples split by gender for each country.

Independent Variables

The empirical analysis includes several sociodemographic variables that are important for predicting attitudes towards prostitution or are common control variables in behavioral research. Previous studies have come to differing conclusions

regarding the impact of age and education on attitudes towards prostitution (Powers et al., 2023; Kuosmanen, 2011; Yan et al., 2018; May, 1999; Sawyer et al., 2001). However, we believe it is important to account for them. The inclusion of *age* is necessary to account for any generational gap in attitudes towards prostitution. *Education* is an important control variable because schools are an influential agent of socialization on people's attitudes. Education is a continuous measure representing the highest level of education completed from one indicating less than primary school to eight indicating a doctoral degree or equivalent. Likewise, religiosity is another agent of socialization that impacts attitudes on sexual behavior. *Religiosity* is measured as a continuous variable representing how important God is in the respondent's life (1 = not at all important to 10 = very important) (Abrams & Della Fave, 1976; Basow & Campanile, 1990; Cosby et al., 1996; May, 1999; Jakobsson & Kotsadam, 2011; Valor-Segura et al., 2011). Religious individuals may disapprove of prostitution because it violates the traditional norms concerning sexual behavior. *Income* is a control variable that is useful for assessing any social class differences in attitudes that might exist. The variable is measured as the respondent's income category from the 1st decile to 10th decile. Finally, *gender* is one of the main variables of interest in the analysis (0 = man, 1 = woman).

In addition, there are several attitudinal variables in the analysis to account for explanations of variance in attitudes towards prostitution. We include a continuous self-placement measure of *political ideology* on a scale from left (1) to right (10). Some studies have shown that negativity towards the exchange of sex for payment is related to conservative ideas about society (Valor-Segura et al., 2011; see also: Armstrong, 2016). A measure of *political interest* is also important to include since interest in politics has been shown to impact a range of attitudes. The political interest measure is a continuous measure that indicates the respondent's level of interest in politics from not at all interested (0) to very interested (3). We also include a variable that attempts to indirectly get at attitudes towards gender equality. In particular, the respondents' level of agreement with that idea that *men are better political leaders* is included (0 = completely disagree, 1 = disagree, 2 = agree, 3 = completely agree). Since sexual activity is commonly thought of as private, we include an indirect measure that represents the respondents' level of commitment to *privacy*. The question that we utilize asks respondents whether they think the government should have the right to collect information about everyone living in a country without their knowledge (0 = should not have right, 1 = probably should not have right, 2 = should have right, 3 = definitely should have right). Finally, we include a variable that more generally measures attitudes towards sexual behavior. The variable measures the extent to which the respondent thinks that *non-committal casual sex*

is acceptable. The measure is continuous ranging from one indicating “never acceptable” to ten indicating “completely acceptable.” Appendix 1 provides a more thorough description of the coding scheme for independent variables, and Appendixes 2 and 3 present descriptive statistics.

Method

We employ multivariate OLS linear regression to predict respondents’ attitude towards the acceptability of prostitution in each country. The dependent variable is measured similar to traditional feeling thermometers or other Likert-type survey response questions ordinarily recognized as continuous measures. The acceptability-scale is 10 points; thus, respondents are offered substantial variation in response offering when indicating whether they find prostitution more or less acceptable. As a robustness check, ordered logit models were also estimated, and the results were indistinguishable from the OLS results. Therefore, for ease of interpretation for the reader, we present the OLS results. In addition, we employ post-stratification survey weights in the estimation of statistical models to correct for sampling error and potential survey nonresponse bias. In sum, we present results from two models for each Nordic country: (1) a basic model with all independent variables and (2) an interactive model with an interaction between *gender* and the respondent’s attitude towards *non-committal casual sex*. As a robustness check, we explored the interaction between gender and all other variables of interest and found no other interactive effects.

Results

Table 1 presents the percentage of respondents selecting each level for the variable measuring acceptability of prostitution by country. There is considerable variation when comparing attitudes towards the acceptability of prostitution in

the five countries. There are only two countries, Iceland and Sweden, where there is no statistically significant bivariate difference when comparing their distributions. The modal category for all five countries is “1—never acceptable.” Iceland (54.54 percent) and Sweden (49.24 percent) are the countries that have the largest percentage of respondents selecting “1—never acceptable,” which is around half or slightly more of all respondents in the samples. In Norway and Finland, between 12 and 18 percent, fewer respondents selected “1—never acceptable,” 37.17 and 32.12 percent, respectively. In comparison, Denmark has the lowest number of respondents selecting “1—never acceptable,” at just less than a quarter of all respondents (23.56 percent).

When combining all negative evaluations towards the acceptability of prostitution (responses 1–4), clear variance between the countries exists (Appendix—Table 8). In all five countries, a majority of respondents provide a negative evaluation towards the acceptability of prostitution. Around 77 percent of respondents in Sweden and Iceland indicate a negative evaluation, 69 percent in Norway, 61 percent in Finland, and 52 percent in Denmark. The results provide some evidence that citizens are more likely to view prostitution as never acceptable in countries where a harsher stance towards the exchange of sex for payment is present from the government.

On the other hand, Table 1 indicates that relatively few respondents indicate that prostitution is “10—completely acceptable.” In Denmark, the largest percentage of respondents (5.96 percent) indicates that prostitution is “completely acceptable,” followed by Finland (2.85 percent), Norway (2.85 percent), Iceland (2.18 percent), and Sweden (2 percent). The statistics indicates a lack of variance when exploring the most positive evaluation of the acceptability of prostitution. However, when combining all positive evaluations towards the acceptability of prostitution (responses 6–10), important differences emerge between the five countries. Just over a quarter of all respondents in Denmark (28.71 percent) and Finland (25.81 percent) indicate some positive evaluation towards the acceptability of prostitution. The

Table 1 Descriptive statistics—acceptability of prostitution

Acceptability of prostitution	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
1 – Never acceptable	23.56%	32.12%	54.54%	37.17%	49.24%
2	11.63	14.09	10.38	15.24	12.21
3	12	9.46	7.99	11.11	11.45
4	6.2	5.62	4.43	5.9	4.77
5	17.9	12.9	12.35	16.72	10.59
6	6.43	6.8	2.47	3.15	2.77
7	6.84	7.19	2.54	4.13	3.63
8	6.87	6	2.47	2.85	2.67
9	2.61	2.96	0.65	0.88	0.67
10 – Completely acceptable	5.96	2.86	2.18	2.85	2

All countries are statistically different with the exception of Iceland and Sweden

result demonstrates that about 1 in 4 respondents provide a positive evaluation in the two countries. In contrast, around 1 in 10 respondents provided a positive evaluation in Iceland (10.31 percent), Norway (13.86 percent), and Sweden (11.74 percent). The results provide some evidence that citizens are more likely to view prostitution as acceptable in countries where governments have been more tolerant of the exchange of sex for payment.

In Fig. 1, the distribution of responses is plotted for the acceptability of prostitution variable by gender in each country in order to give a quick snapshot of the potential gender gaps that exist. The descriptive statistics are also presented in Appendix 4. The distributions rarely overlap in Denmark and Finland, which indicates a considerable gender gap in attitudes towards prostitution. In comparison, there is some degree of overlap of the distributions in Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. However, important variation exists between women and men on response selections, especially when exploring “1—never acceptable” and 5 (neutral response).

In particular, in all five countries, a larger percentage of women respondents indicate that prostitution is “1—never acceptable.” The gap is largest in Finland and Iceland where just over a 26-percentage point gap exists. In Finland, 44.06 percent of women indicate that prostitution is “1—never

acceptable” compared to just 18.4 percent of men, while in Iceland 67.67 percent of women indicate “1—never acceptable” compared to 41 percent of men. The gender gap in responding “1—never acceptable” is smaller, but still notable, in Denmark (15.42 percent), Norway (8.3 percent), and Sweden (12.24 percent). In Denmark, 31.17 percent of women indicate that prostitution is “1—never acceptable” compared to 15.75 percent of men. In Norway, a greater percentage of both women (41.23 percent) and men (32.93 percent) indicate that prostitution is “1—never acceptable.” The largest percentage of women (55.34 percent) and men (43 percent) that indicate a belief that prostitution is “1—never acceptable” exists in Sweden. When exploring overall negative evaluations (responses 1–4), the gender gap is largest in Denmark (29.28 percent) and Finland (33.42 percent), which are the two countries where governments take a less harsh stance towards exchanging sex for payment. The gender gap is moderately sizable in Iceland (20.16 percent), Norway (12.48 percent), and Sweden (7.72 percent) when looking at negative evaluations (responses 1–4).

While the gender gap exists for all countries when assessing neutral evaluations (response 5) or the selections of “10—completely acceptable,” a similar pattern exists when comparing negative (responses 1–4) and positive evaluations

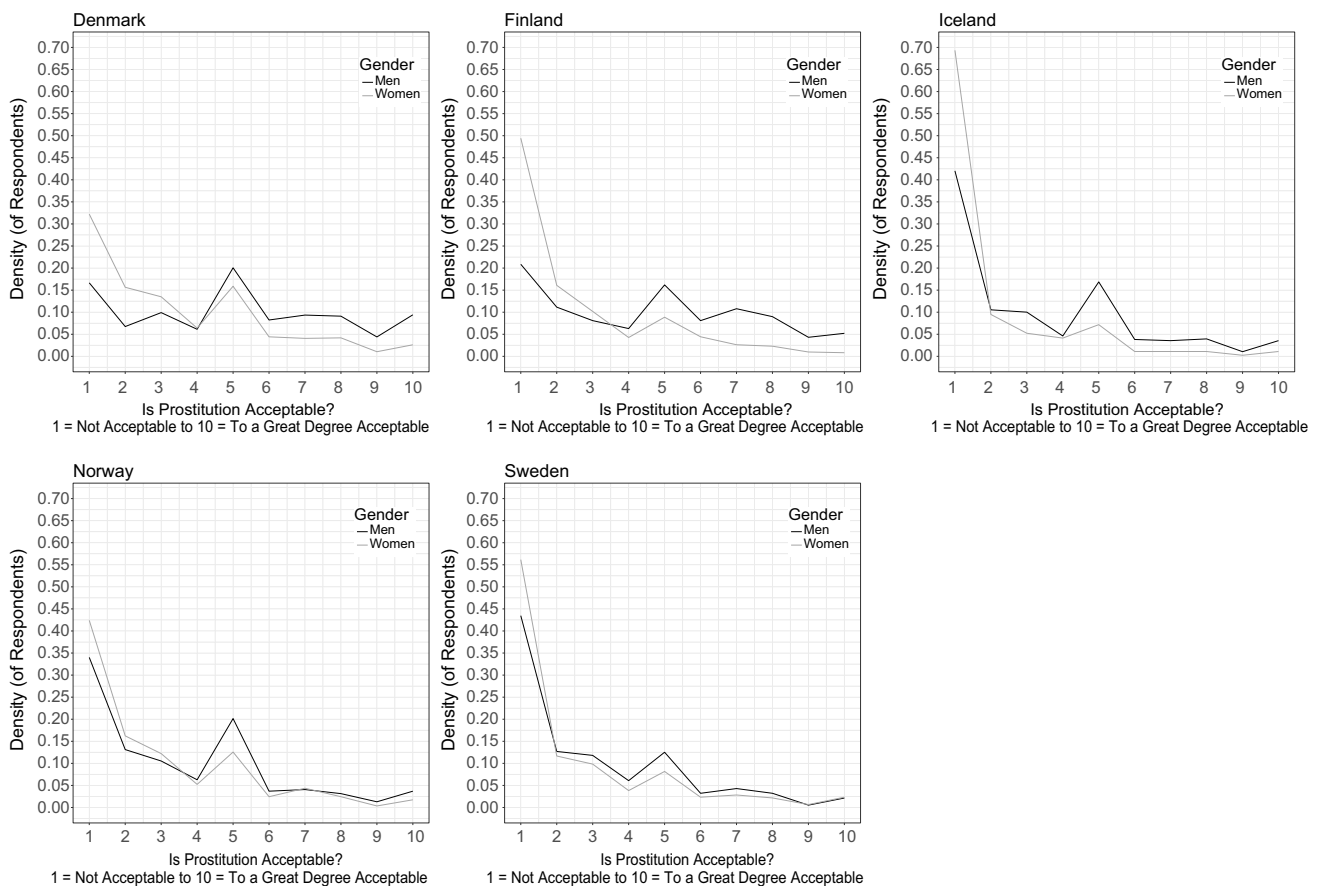


Fig. 1 Density plot of acceptability of prostitution by gender—Nordic countries

(responses 6–10) by country. The gender gap in positive evaluations is largest in Denmark (24.67 percent) and Finland (26.88 percent). In both countries, around 40 percent of men indicate a positive evaluation towards the acceptability of prostitution. The gender gap in evaluations is smaller in Iceland (11.36 percent), Norway (5.1 percent), and Sweden (2.92 percent). In Iceland, Norway, and Sweden, between 13 and 16 percent of men indicate a positive evaluation towards prostitution. The results lend some evidence that gender plays a critical role in determining attitudes towards prostitution.

The results from multiple regression analyses predicting respondents' evaluation of the acceptability of prostitution are presented in Table 2 for all five countries. For each country, model output from a basic model and a model with an interactive term representing the relationship between gender and non-committal casual sex are presented. In both the basic and interactive models, there are no discernible

sociodemographic control variable trends across all five countries. In Denmark, age has a small, positive statistically significant relationship with acceptability of prostitution, while education has a moderately sized negative relationship. However, age and education have no relationship with views on the acceptability of prostitution in any other country. Similarly, income has a small, negative relationship with the acceptability of prostitution in only Iceland and Sweden, and religiosity has a small, negative relationship in Denmark and Sweden (and Iceland in the interactive model). Notably, these trends do not exist in the other countries.

When exploring the relationship between the attitudinal control variables and the acceptability of prostitution, there are similarly no discernible trends across the five countries. Respondents at higher levels of political interest are statistically more accepting of prostitution in Iceland and Sweden, but there is no impact in the other three countries. Liberal respondents on the self-placement ideological scale are

Table 2 Predicting attitudes towards prostitution—basic and interactive models

	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
(Intercept)	2.40*	1.48*	1.93*	1.32*	2.41*	1.87*	1.02*	1.43*	1.03*	2.32*
	(0.41)	(0.50)	(0.43)	(0.43)	(0.49)	(0.45)	(0.52)	(0.48)	(0.45)	(0.49)
Age	0.02*	0.01	−0.01	0.00	−0.01	0.02*	0.01	−0.01	0.00	−0.01
	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Woman	−1.53*	−1.81*	−1.05*	−0.59*	−0.30	−0.53	−0.71*	−0.01	0.05	−0.11
	(0.14)	(0.17)	(0.13)	(0.15)	(0.16)	(0.30)	(0.27)	(0.27)	(0.25)	(0.28)
Education	−0.14*	0.05	−0.02	0.00	−0.04	−0.13*	0.05	−0.02	0.01	−0.04
	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.05)
Income	−0.04	−0.01	−0.06*	−0.02	−0.10*	−0.04	−0.01	−0.06*	−0.03	−0.09*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Religiosity	−0.06*	−0.02	−0.05	−0.03	−0.07*	−0.06*	−0.02	−0.05*	−0.03	−0.07*
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Political interest	0.11	0.13	0.24*	0.20	0.30*	0.12	0.12	0.25*	0.20	0.30*
	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.11)	(0.09)	(0.10)	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.11)
Political ideology	0.10*	−0.00	0.02	0.00	0.02	0.10*	−0.01	0.02	−0.00	0.02
	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Men better leaders	0.19	0.12	0.30*	0.10	0.20	0.17	0.09	0.29*	0.08	0.20
	(0.11)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.15)	(0.10)	(0.12)	(0.13)	(0.12)	(0.15)
Privacy	−0.08	0.13	−0.04	0.04	0.15	−0.09	0.13	−0.04	0.04	0.14
	(0.07)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.10)	(0.07)	(0.09)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.10)
Non-committal casual sex	0.31*	0.48*	0.23*	0.31*	0.18*	0.38*	0.58*	0.31*	0.37*	0.20*
	(0.02)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
Interaction—woman: Non-committal casual sex						−0.15*	−0.21*	−0.17*	−0.11*	−0.03
						(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.04)	(0.05)	(0.05)
<i>N</i>	2969	1007	1348	1013	1019	2969	1007	1348	1013	1019
<i>R</i> squared	0.221	0.410	0.168	0.176	0.134	0.228	0.422	0.178	0.181	0.135
AIC	15,161.31	4549.03	6004.99	4511.43	4669.09	15,137.49	4529.78	5989.71	4506.61	4670.58
BIC	15,425.13	4765.28	6234.07	4727.94	4885.86	15,425.29	4765.69	6239.62	4742.80	4907.06
Log likelihood	−7536.65	−2230.52	−2958.49	−2211.72	−2290.55	−7520.74	−2216.89	−2946.86	−2205.30	−2287.29

*Statistical significance at $p < 0.05$; standard errors in parentheses; survey weights utilized

more accepting of prostitution in Denmark only. Likewise, a belief that men are better political leaders is associated with more accepting attitudes towards prostitution in Iceland only. Finally, there is no impact between attitudes towards individual privacy and attitudes towards prostitution.

In the basic model, gender appears to be the only sociodemographic variable with a fairly consistent trend across the countries. Women are statistically less accepting of prostitution when compared to men in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Norway. The impact ranges from just over half a point less in Norway (−0.59) to almost two points in Finland (−1.81) on the 1–10 scale. The result indicates that gender has a fairly large impact and provides some evidence in support of H_1 . There is no statistically significant difference between women and men in Sweden. The forceful campaign against the sex trade that has been conducted in Sweden may be part of the explanation.

At the same time, attitudes towards non-committal casual sex appear to be the only attitudinal predictor of attitudes towards the acceptability of prostitution in all five countries. The results indicate that the relationship is strong. In the basic models, variance on attitudes towards non-committal casual sex can explain a difference of between around 1.8 points (Sweden) to 4.8 points (Finland) on the 1–10 scale

on attitudes towards the acceptability of prostitution. The results provide support for H_2 , which states that attitudes towards general sexual behavior will impact attitudes towards prostitution.

That being said, output from the models that contain an interaction term between gender and non-committal casual sex indicate that the relationship between these variables and attitudes towards prostitution is more nuanced than the basic models display. In the interactive models, while attitudes towards non-committal casual sex are statistically significant in all countries, gender is only a statistically significant predictor in Finland. The result indicates that gender does not have a statistically significant effect in Denmark, Iceland, Norway, or Sweden when a respondent indicates that non-committal casual sex is “1—never acceptable.” However, the interaction term is statistically significant in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, and Norway, but not in Sweden. The result shows that the impact of attitudes towards non-committal casual sex on attitudes towards the acceptability of prostitution is different for women when compared to men in four out of the five countries.

To view precisely how women and men differ in their translation of attitudes towards non-committal casual sex into attitudes on the acceptability of prostitution, predicted

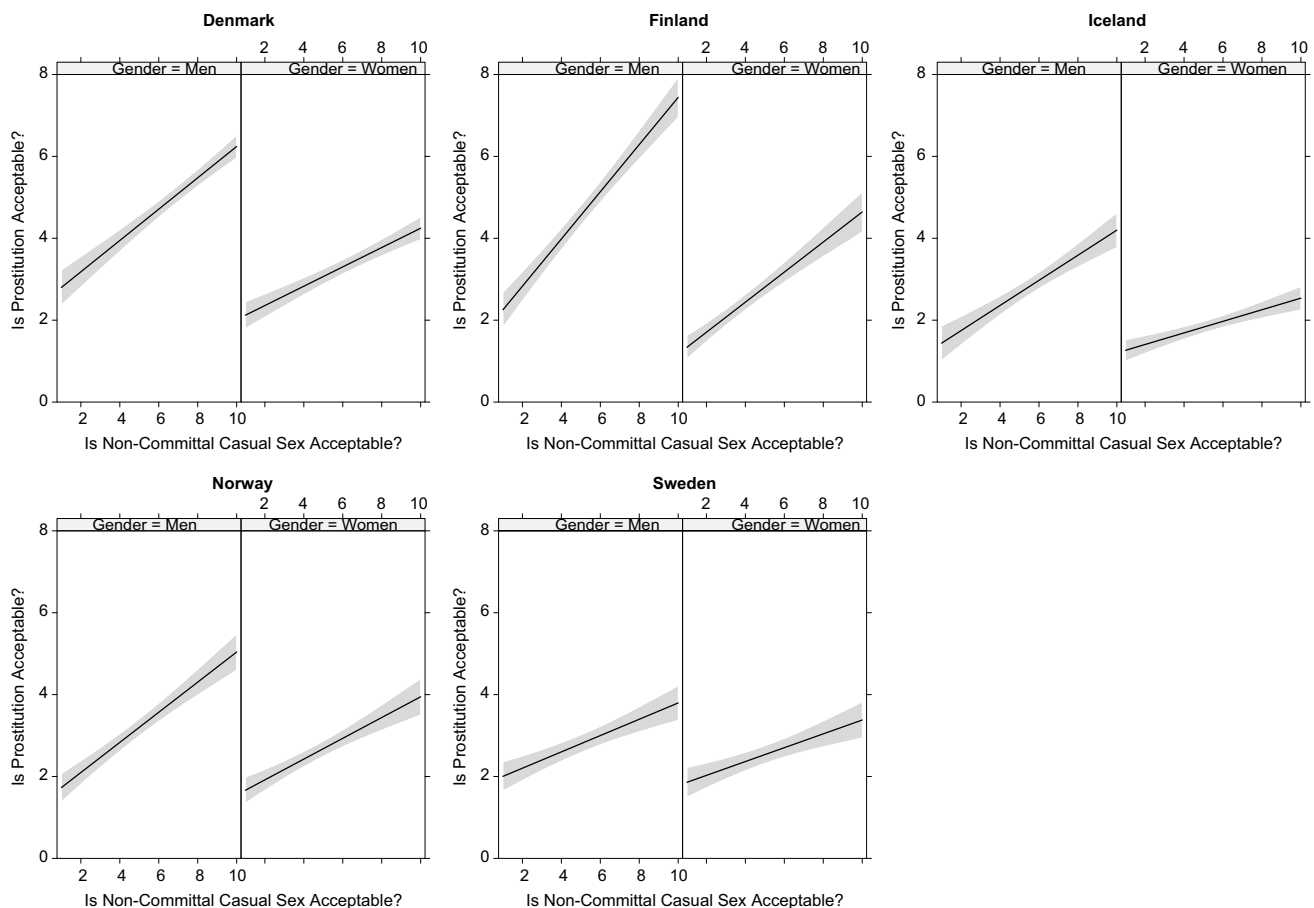


Fig. 2 The effect of the interaction between attitudes towards non-committal casual sex and gender on acceptability of prostitution

probabilities are plotted in Fig. 2 for each country. All predicted probabilities are calculated with holding independent variables at their survey-weighted means, and 95 percent confidence intervals are displayed. When moving from indicating non-committal casual sex is “1—never acceptable” to “10—completely acceptable,” the slope predicting attitudes on the acceptability of prostitution is noticeably steeper for men when compared to women in all countries except Sweden. In fact, the slope is steepest in Denmark and Finland, moderately steep in Iceland and Norway, and not very steep in Sweden. There is a consistent increase in the acceptability of prostitution as a man increases in their acceptance of non-committal casual sex. For women in these four countries, the level of acceptability of non-committal casual sex has a smaller impact on women finding prostitution acceptable than it does for men. The slope is flatter which indicates that variance in attitudes towards the acceptability of

non-committal casual sex does not necessarily translate into differing attitudes towards the acceptability of prostitution. The findings provide support for H_3 and H_4 .

In Fig. 3, we plot respondents’ predicted values of the acceptability of prostitution for respondents that said that non-committal casual sex: (1) “1—never acceptable” and (2) “10—completely acceptable.” Fig. 3 allows us to see precisely where the gender gaps exist when translating attitudes on general sexual behavior towards attitudes on the acceptability of prostitution. In the top panel, the plot indicates that for women and men that believe that non-committal casual sex is “1—never acceptable,” there is no statistically significant gender gap in Denmark, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. Women and men find prostitution in these four countries to be equally unacceptable when they also believe that non-committal casual sex is never acceptable. In addition, the gender gap in Finland (0.2 points) is quite small when factoring in the 95 percent confidence bounds.

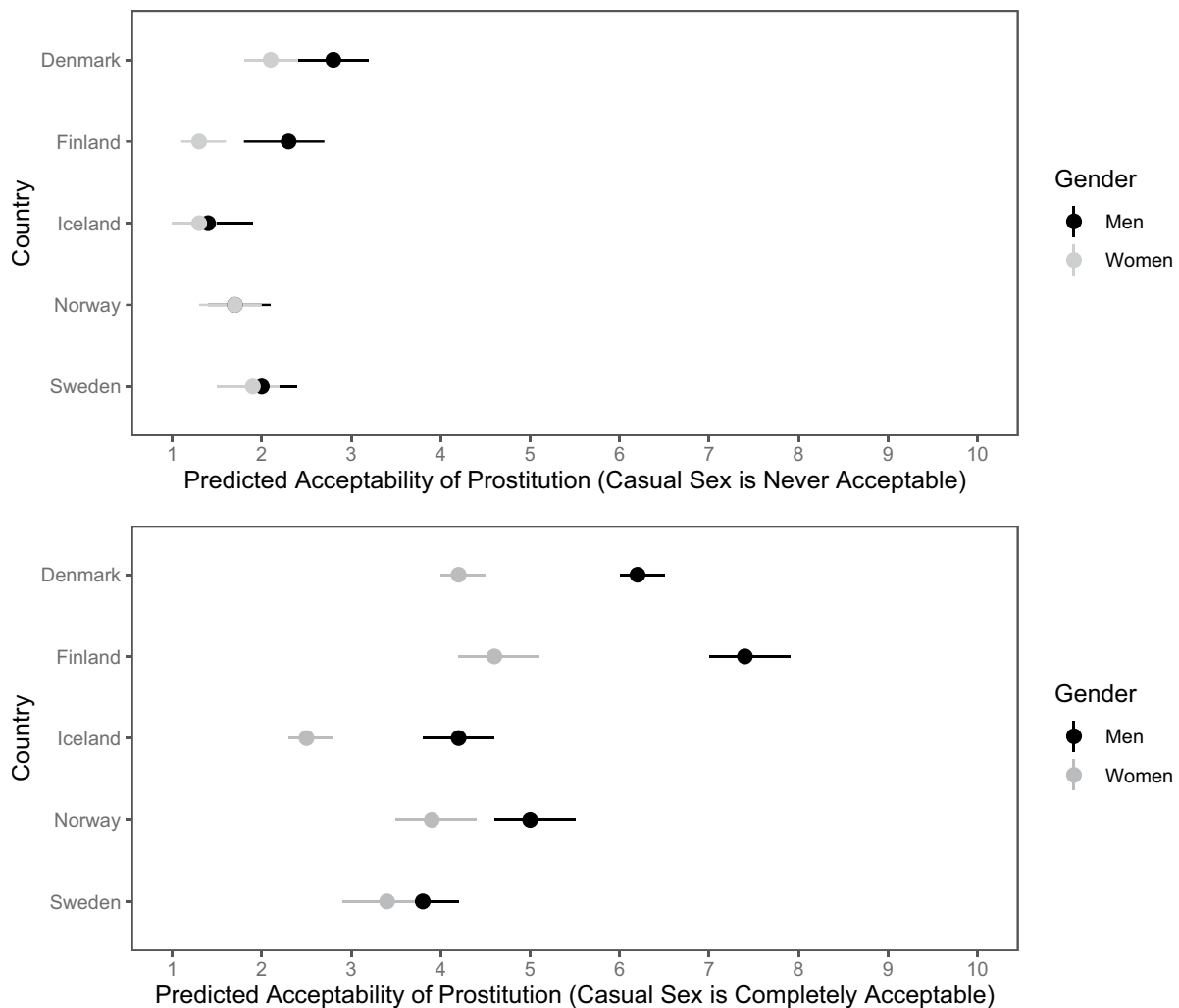


Fig. 3 Acceptability of prostitution—comparing non-committal casual sex completely unacceptable to completely acceptable by gender

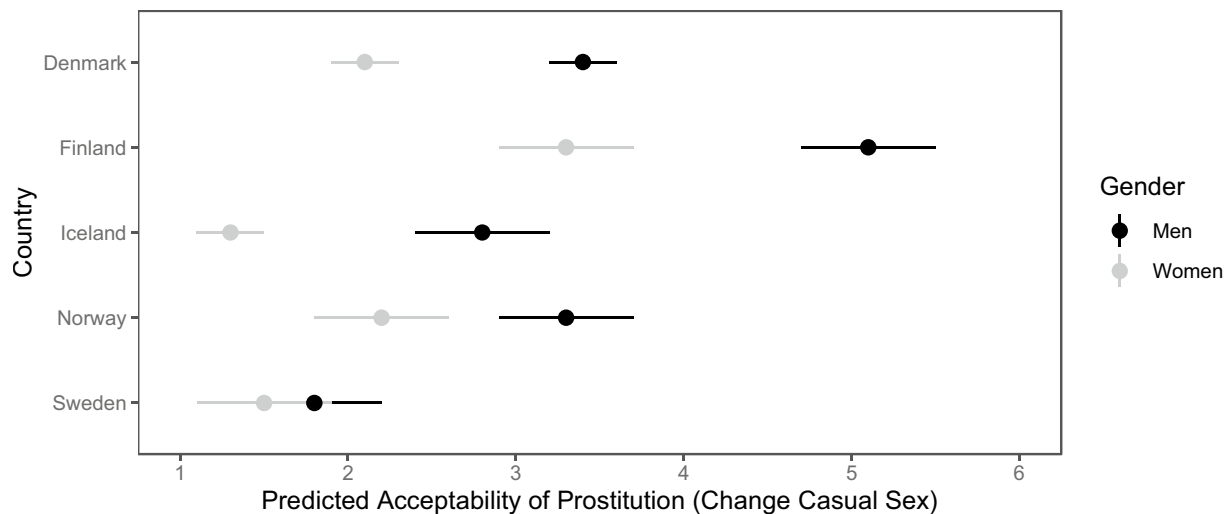


Fig. 4 Change in acceptability of prostitution—non-committal casual sex completely unacceptable to completely acceptable by gender

In the bottom panel of Fig. 3, the predictions indicate that the gender gap in attitudes towards prostitution exists when the respondents indicate that non-committal casual sex is “10—completely acceptable.” In Denmark, Finland, and Iceland, there is a sizable gender gap in the acceptability of prostitution for respondents that think that non-committal casual sex is completely acceptable. In fact, in Finland, women that indicate that non-committal casual sex is completely acceptable are still predicted to lean towards finding prostitution unacceptable, while men are predicted to indicate that prostitution is acceptable (1.9-point difference). In Norway, the gender gap is much smaller, and in Sweden, a gender gap does not exist. Figure 3 shows that men are much more likely to translate general liberal attitudes on sexual behavior into liberal attitudes towards prostitution in Denmark (1.5 points) and Finland (1.9 points), moderately likely in Iceland (1 point) and Norway (0.2 points), and equally likely in Sweden when compared to women. The results provide some support for H_4 .

In Fig. 4, we further demonstrate how liberalization of attitudes towards general sexual behavior impacts attitudes on the acceptability of prostitution differently for women and men. In particular, we plot the predicted change in acceptability of prostitution when comparing a respondent that indicates that non-committal casual sex is “1—never acceptable” to a respondent that indicates “10—completely acceptable” for both groups. The results demonstrate that the change in predicted acceptability of prostitution is much larger for men when compared to women in Denmark (0.9 points), Finland (1 point), and Iceland (0.9 points). In Norway, the gender gap in the change in predicted acceptability is smaller (0.3 points), and in Sweden, a gender gap does not exist. Taken together, the empirical results provide

convincing evidence that women are less likely to translate liberal attitudes towards general sexual behavior into lenient attitudes towards prostitution.

Conclusion

In this study, we asked which are the influential factors on individual-level attitudes towards the acceptability of exchanging sex for payment in the Nordic countries. Cross-national surveys inquiring about views on prostitution provided us with the possibility to explore attitudes in countries where there are notable similarities and differences in how the respective governments treat this issue (EVS, 2017; WVS, 2020). We drew on the findings of previous studies regarding gender and attitudes towards general sexual behavior, furthering our understanding of how these variables interact with attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment.

Our analysis reveals considerable variation when comparing individual-level attitudes towards prostitution in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway, and Sweden. While the majority of respondents provide negative evaluations in all five countries, there are notable differences between them. The results provide some evidence that people are more likely to view the exchange of sex for payment as never acceptable in countries where the government has taken a harsher stance against the sex trade. In contrast, people in countries where governments have been more tolerant towards the sex trade are more likely to view such exchanges as acceptable. Overall, the attitudinal differences seem to align with the way the different Nordic governments have approached the issue at hand. The results emphasize the

importance of policymakers considering the impact of their policies on public opinion. It is worth noting that the relationship between public attitudes and government policies is intricate and dynamic. Government stances and campaigns on morally and politically charged issues can undeniably influence public discourse and impact public attitudes. However, this process is far from unidirectional, at least in democratic countries where the attitudes of the population shape government decisions, making the relationship complex.

Our results suggest that gender plays a critical role in determining attitudes towards exchanging sex for payment. The study highlights a substantial gender gap in these attitudes in the Nordic countries, with women generally holding more negative views compared to men, except in Sweden where no gender gap in attitudes is observed. Like Hansen and Johansson (2022), we find a strong relationship between attitudes towards non-committal casual sex and attitudes towards the acceptability of exchanging sex for payment in the region. Also here, the results indicate a gender gap. Our results suggest that the impact attitudes towards non-committal casual sex have on attitudes towards the acceptability of exchanging sex for payment is different for women in four out of the five countries. Overall, the empirical results provide convincing evidence that women are less likely than men to translate liberal attitudes towards general sexual behavior into lenient attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment. Policymakers and other interest groups should recognize that attitudes towards these two concepts are interconnected and that efforts to promote more liberal attitudes towards general sexual behavior may not necessarily translate into lenient views towards the exchange of sex for payment for both women and men. The exception of Sweden, where there is no attitudinal gender gap, is attributed to the Swedish government's strong negative stance and campaign against the sex trade, indicating the influence of policy and social factors on attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment.

The contribution of the study is that it points to a gender gap in attitudes towards the exchange of sex for payment and potential reasons behind gender differences. The differences between men and women that we identify, including differences in the interactive effect, are significant and quite substantive considering the overall high degree of homogeneity of the Nordic region. One potential reason for the gender gap we identify in four of the five countries could be that women associate the exchange of sex for payment with negative societal implications to a higher degree than men, including gender inequality and women's exploitation. Additionally, the existence of a sexual double standard may help explain why it is more important for women to distinguish between the exchange of sex for payment and general sexual liberal behavior. The findings further our understanding about the gendered dynamics that are at play in determining individual-level attitudes towards nonconformist sexual practices and morally and

politically charged issues like the exchange of sex for payment. Addressing the underlying reasons for this gender disparity, such as societal norms, should be considered in policies and campaigns aimed at shifting public attitudes towards the exchange in sex for payment.

One limitation of our study is the potential influence of survey question wording that uses the term prostitution. Different framing of questions related to attitudes towards the acceptability of exchanging sex for payment yield varying results (Hansen & Johansson, 2023). Acknowledging this limitation, future research should explore the impact of question wording in the Nordic countries. Given the historical framing of prostitution as a women's issue, another limitation is that the survey may not fully capture the nuances of attitudes towards sex work, including male involvement in sex work. It is important to recognize that attitudes towards male sex work may not align with those towards female sex work, and further research should address this gap. This study focused on the Nordic countries, and its findings may not be easily generalized to other regions with different cultural and political contexts. More research on a wider range of countries with varying government policies and cultural contexts would allow for more comprehensive comparative analyses. These avenues for future research can help build upon the findings of this study and provide a more complete understanding of the complex relationships between government policies, gender, and public attitudes in the context of debated social issues.

Appendix 1. Variable Coding

Empirical analysis

Age—continuous measure representing the age of the respondent at the time of the survey

Education—continuous measure representing the highest level of education completed, 1 = less than primary to 8 = doctoral or equivalent

Income—continuous measure representing income category, 1 = A-1st decile to 10 = J-10th decile

Gender—0 = man; 1 = woman

Political ideology—continuous measure ranging from 1 = left to 10 = right

Political interest—continuous measure, 0 = not at all interested; 1 = not very interested; 2 = somewhat interested; 3 = very interested

Religiosity—continuous measure asking how important God is in respondent's life 1 = not at all important to 10 = very important

Men better political leaders—continuous measure, 0 = strongly disagree; 1 = disagree; 2 = agree; 3 = completely agree

Privacy—continuous measure, do you think that the government should have the right to collect information about everyone living in the country without their knowledge? 0 = definitely should not have right; 1 = probably should not have right; 2 = should have right; 3 = definitely should have right

Non-committal casual sex—continuous measure, to what extent do you think non-committal sex is acceptable? 1 = not at all to 10 = greatly

Appendix 2. Descriptive Statistics—Full Sample

Table 3 Descriptive statistics—sociodemographics

Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	18	52	50.76	82	17.30
Education	0	4	4.38	8	1.91
Income (scaled variable)	1	6	6.13	10	2.79
Variable	0	1			
Gender	49.2%	50.8%			

Table 4 Descriptive statistics—political attitudes

Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Political ideology	1	5	5.38	10	2.19
Political interest	0	2	1.78	3	0.83
Importance of God—religiosity	1	3	4.04	10	2.99
Men better political leaders	0	0	0.48	3	0.67
Collect info w/out knowledge—privacy	0	1	0.78	3	0.91
Non-committal casual sex—acceptable	1	3	3.49	10	2.64

Appendix 3. Descriptive statistics—country samples

Table 5 Descriptive statistics—sociodemographics

Denmark					
Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	18	52	51.17	82	17.28
Education	0	5	4.44	8	1.92
Income	1	7	6.23	10	2.81
Variable	0	1			
Gender	49.36%	50.64%			

Finland					
Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	18	56	53.15	82	17.67
Education	0	4	4.35	8	1.91
Income	1	6	6.16	10	2.67
Variable	0	1			
Gender	49.16%	50.84%			

Iceland					
Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	18	49	48.52	82	16.75
Education	0	3	4.26	8	1.95
Income	1	6	6.12	10	2.59
Variable	0	1			
Gender	49.24%	50.76%			

Norway					
Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	18	49	48.76	82	16.99
Education	1	3	4.34	8	1.84
Income	1	5	5	10	2.65
Variable	0	1			
Gender	48.97%	51.03%			

Sweden					
Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Age	18	53.50	52.14	82	17.49
Education	0	4	4.44	8	1.86
Income	1	8	6.92	10	2.88
Variable	0	1			
Gender	49.05%	50.95%			

Table 6 Descriptive statistics—political attitudes

Denmark					
Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Political ideology	1	5	5.24	10	2.21
Political interest	0	2	1.83	3	0.80
Importance of God—religiosity	1	3	3.74	10	2.76
Men better political leaders	0	0	0.54	3	0.68
Collect info w/out knowledge—privacy	0	1	0.86	3	0.94
Non-committal casual sex—acceptable	1	4	4.22	10	2.76

Finland					
Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Political ideology	1	6	5.86	10	2.20
Political interest	0	2	1.53	3	0.81
Importance of God—religiosity	1	5	4.77	10	3.15
Men better political leaders	0	1	0.69	3	0.71

Finland					
Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Collect info w/out knowledge—privacy	0	1	1.15	3	0.93
Non-committal casual sex—acceptable	1	3	3.7	10	2.69
Iceland					
Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Political ideology	1	5	5.25	10	2.20
Political interest	0	2	1.74	3	0.87
Importance of God—religiosity	1	5	4.79	10	3.10
Men better political leaders	0	0	0.49	3	0.64
Collect info w/out knowledge—privacy	0	0	0.51	3	0.75
Non-committal casual sex—acceptable	1	1	2.59	10	2.28
Norway					
Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Political ideology	1	5	5.36	10	2.15
Political interest	0	2	1.88	3	0.80
Importance of God—religiosity	1	3	3.70	10	2.98
Men better political leaders	0	0	0.27	3	0.64
Collect info w/out knowledge—privacy	0	0	0.58	3	0.85
Non-committal casual sex—acceptable	1	2	3.15	10	2.39
Sweden					
Variable	Min	Median	Mean	Max	SD
Political ideology	1	5	5.52	10	2.09
Political interest	0	2	1.80	3	0.84
Importance of God—religiosity	1	2	3.53	10	3.01
Men better political leaders	0	0	0.32	3	0.58
Collect info w/out knowledge—privacy	0	1	0.77	3	0.89
Non-committal casual sex—acceptable	1	2	2.70	10	2.28

Appendix 4. Descriptive statistics—acceptability of prostitution

Table 7 Descriptive statistics—acceptability of prostitution

Women					
Acceptability of prostitution	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
1 – Never acceptable	31.17%*	44.96%*	67.67%*	41.23%*	55.24%*
2	16.21	17.25	10.01	16.96	12.17

Women					
Acceptability of prostitution	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
3	14.1	10.85	5.44	12.14	10.3
4	6.35	4.65	4.15	5.2	3.75
5	15.62	9.69	8.01	13.1	8.24
6	4.43	5.04	0.86	2.7	2.43
7	3.97	3.1	1.29	4.05	3
8	4.43	2.71	1.29	2.5	1.87
9	1.14	1.16	0.28	0.39	0.75
10 – Completely acceptable	2.58	0.59	1	1.73	2.25
Men					
Acceptability of prostitution	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
1 – Never acceptable	15.75%	18.84%	41%	32.93%	43%
2	6.92	10.82	10.77	13.45	12.26
3	9.84	8.02	10.62	10.04	12.64
4	6.04	6.61	4.72	6.63	5.84
5	20.23	16.23	16.81	20.48	13.04
6	8.49	8.62	4.13	3.61	3.11
7	9.78	11.42	3.84	4.22	4.28
8	9.37	9.42	3.69	3.21	3.5
9	4.14	4.81	1.03	1.41	0.58
10 – Completely acceptable	9.44	5.21	3.39	4.02	1.75

*A statistically significant gender gap in bivariate models

Table 8 Descriptive statistics—acceptability of prostitution collapsed

Acceptability of prostitution	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
1–4 – Negative response	53.39%	61.29%	77.34%	69.42%	77.67%
5 – Neutral	17.9	12.9	12.35	16.72	10.59
6–10 – Positive response	28.71	25.81	10.31	13.86	11.74

All countries are statistically different with the exception of Iceland and Sweden

Table 9 Descriptive statistics—acceptability of prostitution collapsed

Women					
Acceptability of prostitution	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
1–4 – Negative response	67.83%*	77.71%*	87.27%*	75.53%*	81.46%*

Women					
Acceptability of prostitution	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
5 – Neutral	15.62	9.69	8.01	13.1	8.24
6–10 – Positive response	16.55	12.6	4.72	11.37	10.3
Men					
Acceptability of prostitution	Denmark	Finland	Iceland	Norway	Sweden
1–4 – Negative response	38.55%	44.29%	67.11%	63.05%	73.74%
5 – Neutral	20.23	16.23	16.81	20.48	13.04
6–10 – Positive response	41.22	39.48	16.08	16.47	13.22

*A statistically significant gender gap in bivariate models

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Code Availability R statistical software code and packages will also be made available in the data repository.

Declarations

Ethics Approval Ethical Review Process: University of Wisconsin—Parkside Institutional Review Board Compliance FY20-30.

Consent to Participate Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

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