Knorrst advances bill imposing hefty fines on prostitution clients

Under proposal, first-time offenders would have to pay NIS 1,500, with courts able to levy a maximum penalty of NIS 75,300 on repeat Johns.

The Knesset on Monday gave initial approval to a bill allowing heavy fines to be levied on people caught hiring prostitutes, as the government aims to crack down on sex trafficking.

The legislation passed its first reading by 39-0 votes. It will now face deliberations in the Knesset Committee for the Advancement of Women before coming up for final plenary votes.

Under the terms of the bill, first-time offending Johns would be fined NIS 1,500 ($405), with the penalty increasing to NIS 3,000 ($810) for those who repeat the offense within three years. Courts would be empowered to raise the fines to a maximum of NIS 75,300 ($20,400).

The bill was first proposed as part of a reform package that Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked said aimed at stamping out prostitution, along with rehabilitating those involved in the industry.

Though pimping, sex trafficking, and running a brothel are punishable under Israeli law, prostitution itself remains legal.

Shaked said the law "sends a clear message to those who use prostitution services: Trafficking in women and using prostitutes are completely unacceptable."

Her fellow Jewish Home lawmaker MK Shuli Moalem-Refaeli said Monday's vote was "a significant step in the struggle to eradicate prostitution and the rehabilitation of women, men, and youth in the cycle of prostitution."
Praising the bill, Yesh Atid MK Aliza Lavie tweeted a photo of female MKs from across the political spectrum celebrating the vote in the Knesset plenary.

“We will complete the legislation as soon as possible and 2018 will be a year of good news,” she promised.

Green-lighting the bill in August, ministers also approved the establishment of a team to implement the recommendations of the Committee to Reduce Prostitution, headed by Justice Ministry director-general Amy Palmer.

The team, composed of representatives from the Justice, Welfare, Education and Health ministries, said it will take a two-pronged approach to tackling prostitution.

First, the state will provide expanded health services for those who engage in prostitution and their clients, along with a rehabilitation plan for sex workers that will include therapy and economic services, safe houses, rehab centers and sexual health clinics.

Second, the team will work to to raise public awareness of the harm caused by the prostitution industry, creating programs aimed at students and soldiers.

In 2016, the Welfare Ministry estimated there were 11,420-12,730 sex workers driving the country’s NIS 1.2 billion ($318 million) industry. According to that report, 71 percent of prostitutes said they began sex work out of financial desperation, and 76% said they would leave the industry if they could.

Punishing prostitution clients was first introduced by Sweden in its 1999 Sex Purchase Act — since adopted by Norway, Iceland, Canada, France, and Northern Ireland — which requires consumers to pay a fine or face up to six months in jail.

Defending the apparent contradiction in making sex illegal, but selling it legal, Sweden has contended that prostitution is essentially an act of exploitation and violence by the customers, who hold a position of power and should bear the brunt of the penalty.
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