Ministers approve bill for hefty fines for people who hire prostitutes

First-time offenders could have to pay NIS 1,500, with courts able to impose a maximum penalty of NIS 75,300

By TOI STAFF
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Ministers on Sunday approved a bill that would levy heavy fines on people caught hiring prostitutes as the government aims to crack down on sex trafficking.

“The government today is sending a clear message to those who use prostitution services: Trading in women and using prostitutes are completely invalid,” Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked said following the vote by the Ministerial Committee for Legislation. “Dealing with prostitution needs to be much wider — and we will deal with that in the coming months.”

Under the terms of the bill presented by Shaked, 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 ministers also approved the establishment of a, inter-ministerial committee to implement measures 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.

Those charged under the proposed law will have the option of paying the fine, requesting that it be canceled, or being tried in court. The bill will be brought to the Knesset for readings after the summer recess ends in October.
Ministers also approved establishing 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, will take a dual approach to tackling prostitution.

Firstly, 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.

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

Nitzan Kahana, an attorney who is co-director of the Task Force on Human Trafficking lobbying group, welcomed the developments.

"Today the government said in an unequivocal manner that the country is taking responsibility for the 14,000 men and women in prostitution," she said according to a report from the Hebrew-language Ynet website.

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, which has since been adopted by Norway, Iceland, Canada, France, and Northern Ireland, and requires consumers to pay a fine or face up to six months in jail.

Defending the apparent contradiction in making buying 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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