



Myth Buster

This briefing busts some common myths about commercial sexual exploitation and how to tackle it.

Summary

▶ **MYTH #1:** Criminalising paying for sex would drive the prostitution trade 'underground', rather than reduce the scale of exploitation.

REALITY: There is a logical fallacy underlying claims that outlawing paying for sex would simply drive it 'underground'. Sex buyers have got to be able to locate women they can pay to sexually exploit. If sex buyers can find women being exploited, so can the police and support services. [Read more](#)

▶ **MYTH #2:** Pimping websites make prostitution safer.

REALITY: Pimping websites enable and incentivise sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. These websites, which host adverts for prostitution, expand the scale of sexual exploitation, enabling anyone on the internet to anonymously access the phone numbers of women being advertised for prostitution. Pimping websites are routinely used by sex traffickers and there is no realistic way that the website operators can prevent this. [Read more](#)

▶ **MYTH #3:** Prostitution is regular 'work'.

REALITY: Prostitution is violence against women. Giving a person money - or food, accommodation or drugs - on the condition that they perform sex acts is sexual exploitation and abuse. [Read more](#)

▶ **MYTH #4:** Criminalising paying for sex is pointless because it hasn't ended demand for prostitution anywhere.

REALITY: Laws against murder and rape have not eradicated those crimes, yet we recognise that having laws against them is critical. Criminalising paying for sex is vital for deterring demand for prostitution, holding abusers to account, and enabling women exploited in the sex trade to access justice and support. [Read more](#)

▶ **MYTH #5:** Criminalising pimping websites would displace the problem, rather than reduce it.

REALITY: Pimping websites incentivise sex trafficking. They are a market-expanding force. The websites make it

easier and quicker for any would-be pimp or trafficker to advertise their victims across Scotland. Disincentivising sex trafficking, and reducing its scale, requires outlawing the pimping websites that facilitate it. [Read more](#)

▶ **MYTH #6:** Decriminalising the entire sex trade and recognising it as work would enhance women's safety.

REALITY: Making brothels, pimping and paying for sex legal would state sanction sexual exploitation and abuse, incentivise sex trafficking, and place legal and financial burdens on women exploited through prostitution. [Read more](#)

“These harmful myths about the realities of prostitution seek to hide and sanitise what is violence and exploitation and must be challenged and exposed in order to to end this ruthless trade.”

- Diane Martin CBE, Survivor of the sex trade and Chair of A Model For Scotland

Myth vs reality

MYTH #1: Criminalising paying for sex would drive the prostitution trade ‘underground’, rather than reduce the scale of exploitation.

REALITY: There is a logical fallacy underlying claims that outlawing paying for sex would simply drive it ‘underground’. Sex buyers have got to be able to locate women they can pay to sexually exploit. If sex buyers can find women being exploited, so can the police and support services.

The prostitution trade relies on advertising. Individuals, predominantly women, are advertised for sexual exploitation to men wanting to pay for sex. That advertising can take place on a website, in a newspaper or on the street. All of these methods, however, make the opportunity to sexually exploit a person visible to the sex buyer – and to the police. Police officers and support services can look at the same adverts

A Model For Scotland is calling on the Scottish Government to not only deter demand by outlawing paying for sex, we are calling for victims of sexual exploitation to be decriminalised, which would involve repealing laws against individuals soliciting on the street. This would support victims of sexual exploitation to seek help from authorities without fear they will be criminally sanctioned.

“Sex markets are reliant, by definition, on buyers finding spaces and places where it is possible to pay for sex. In this sense, the underground argument has a logical fallacy at its heart since some level of visibility is required.”

- Study on the gender dimension of trafficking in human beings, European Commission, 2016 ¹

on websites, in newspapers and in phone boxes that sex buyers do, and so locate women being sexually exploited - and the individuals exploiting them.

MYTH #2: Pimping websites make prostitution safer.

REALITY: Pimping websites enable and incentivise sex trafficking and sexual exploitation. These commercial websites, which host adverts for prostitution, expand the scale of sexual exploitation, enabling anyone on the internet to anonymously access the phone numbers of women being advertised for prostitution. Pimping websites are routinely used by sex traffickers and there is no realistic way that the website operators can prevent this.

Most prostitution advertising now takes place online, rather than on the street or via local newspapers. A small number of pimping websites dominate this online advertising 'marketplace'. Market-leading pimping websites centralise and concentrate demand from sex buyers across Scotland. By placing an advert on one of these sites, trafficking gangs can quickly and easily advertise their victims to men across the country, as well as move their victims between different locations by simply altering the location information in their advert.

being advertised on them. On the contrary, they typically openly display the phone numbers of the women being advertised, allowing anyone with access to the internet to immediately and anonymously access these numbers. There is also no way that the website operators can identify if a woman being advertised on their site is being exploited by a third party, such as a trafficker or pimp. Traffickers sometimes require their victims to upload their own adverts to pimping websites, thereby avoiding leaving traces of third party involvement

“My advert was put on the internet. I didn't do that, the pimp's girlfriend did ... I had to fight with the customers but I didn't speak very good English at that time.”

- Natasha, a victim of sex trafficking in Scotland ⁴

As an inquiry by the Scottish Parliament's Cross-Party Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation highlighted, pimping websites make the brutal business of sex trafficking easier and quicker².

Pimping websites do not deliver protection or security to the women

in the exploitation.

Pimping websites are core to the typical business model of sex trafficking³.

MYTH #3: Prostitution is regular ‘work’.

REALITY: Prostitution is violence against women. Giving a person money - or food, accommodation or drugs - on the condition that they perform sex acts is sexual exploitation and abuse.

The prostitution trade is highly gendered. Most people exploited through prostitution and sex trafficking are women, while the overwhelming majority of people who pay to sexually exploit them are men.

Men who pay for sex are not ‘consumers’ harmlessly purchasing services from ‘workers’. Sexual consent is not a commodity that can be bought. Offering a person money, or a place to stay, on the condition that she performs sex acts,

“Prostitution isn’t glamorous and fun. It’s scents and tastes and body fluids, pretending to enjoy (or at least endure) stuff you don’t want to do – stuff that hurts, stuff that’s degrading. I developed Post Traumatic Stress Disorder.”

- Crystal, a survivor of prostitution ⁸

Most women exploited through the sex trade were highly vulnerable before their involvement and experience significant harms as a result. For example, up to 95% of women in street prostitution are believed to be problematic drug users, and approximately 50% of women in prostitution in the UK started being paid for sex acts before they were 18 years old, according to a Home Office report⁵. A nine-country study of the prostitution trade found that 68% of people in prostitution met the diagnostic criteria for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and 89% said they wanted to leave prostitution⁶.

is sexual coercion.

The psychological and physical harms resulting from commercial sexual exploitation can be severe and long-lasting. The Scottish Government rightly recognises that prostitution is a form of violence against women in Equally Safe - Scotland’s strategy for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls⁷.

MYTH #4: Criminalising paying for sex is pointless because it hasn't ended demand for prostitution anywhere.

REALITY: Laws against murder and rape have not eradicated those crimes, yet we recognise that having laws against them is critical. Criminalising paying for sex is vital for deterring demand for prostitution, holding abusers to account, and enabling women exploited in the sex trade to access justice and support.

Most men do not pay for sex. Just 4% of men in Scotland report having paid for sex in the past five years, according to latest figures⁹. The level of demand for prostitution is not inevitable and unchanging. It varies over time and place. During the 1990's, for instance, the number of men in the UK who paid for sex almost doubled from one in 20 to nearly one in 10 men¹⁰.

The level of demand for prostitution

1200 sex buyers: 'Would you change your behaviour if a law was introduced that made it a crime to pay for sex?' Over half of respondents said they would 'definitely', 'probably' or 'possibly' change their behaviour¹¹.

Sweden was the first country to criminalise paying for sex and decriminalise victims of sexual exploitation in 1999. Surveys revealed that the proportion of men who reported

“Sexual exploitation persists due to the failure of States parties to effectively discourage the demand that fosters exploitation and leads to trafficking.”

– Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women General recommendation No. 38 (2020) on trafficking in women and girls in the context of global migration ¹⁴

varies because men who pay to sexually exploit women are not helplessly reacting to uncontrollable sexual 'needs'. They are engaged in an active decision-making process to seek out and pay for someone to perform sex acts on them, and those decisions are influenced by a range of factors – including the risk of criminal sanction. A study by the University of Leicester published in 2018 asked over

paying for sex reduced from 12.7% to 7.6% between 1996 and 2008¹². The most recent research in Sweden found that 7.5% of men had paid for sex. Just 0.8% of these men had paid for sex in the previous 12 months - the smallest proportion recorded in two decades and the lowest level in Europe¹³. Criminalising paying for sex is vital for deterring this form of violence against women.

MYTH #5: Criminalising pimping websites would displace the problem, rather than reduce it.

REALITY: Pimping websites incentivise sex trafficking. They are a market-expanding force. The websites make it easier and quicker for any would-be pimp or trafficker to advertise their victims across Scotland. Disincentivising sex trafficking, and reducing its scale, requires outlawing the pimping websites that facilitate it.

A small number of highly lucrative pimping websites dominate the online marketplace for advertising prostitution. These are the go-to websites for sex buyers looking to find a woman to pay for sex. As a result, pimping websites centralise and concentrate demand from sex buyers online. They make it quick and easy for traffickers and pimps to place adverts of their victims and immediately connect with their 'customer base' across Scotland.

Pimping websites incentivise sex trafficking and sexual exploitation, lowering the practical and financial threshold for would-be exploiters to engage in this highly lucrative crime.

The size and scale of the prostitution trade is not constant. It is context dependent. As highlighted in an inquiry by the Scottish Parliament's Cross-Party Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, pimping websites are a "market-expanding force"¹⁵. The websites hold advantages over other advertising methods that incentivise sexual exploitation.

For example, if women are advertised to sex buyers by standing on the street, they are more visible to the local community and, thereby, the police and support services. Women being advertised for sexual exploitation on the street can also only be seen by sex buyers who physically walk or drive past that

location, in contrast to an advert on a pimping website which can be viewed - anonymously - by sex buyers across Scotland.

Similarly, it would be misplaced to assume that if traffickers could no longer advertise victims on legal pimping websites, the scale of trafficking would remain constant but simply move to hidden online spaces known as the 'dark web'.

As the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and Tech Against Trafficking point out, "*the use of the dark web for advertising human trafficking victims has its limitations. ...human trafficking is a financially motivated crime and traffickers seek as many clients as possible. This is best achieved by using the open web to which everyone has access. The dark web has several technological barriers that can reduce the overall marketplace, and thus it is not well-suited for increasing the numbers of clients, and is more geared towards buyers with niche interests, like in the cases of human trafficking for organ removal, and those trading in child sexual exploitation imagery.*"¹⁶

Traffickers and sex buyers require no technical expertise to use legal, openly operating pimping websites. The substantial scale on which sexual exploitation currently takes place is enabled precisely by how quick and easy

these websites make it for pimps and traffickers to connect with sex buyers. Outlawing pimping websites would remove this major facilitator of sex trafficking in Scotland.

“It is not correct to assume that when you shut down the sites the entire market is going to move back to the streets. That’s just not how it goes, because there is so much [of a] barrier to using other methods. The market is going to shrink in the same way that it expanded when it went to the internet.”

- Valiant Richey, Special Representative and Co-ordinator for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings at the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) ¹⁷

MYTH #6: Decriminalising the entire sex trade and recognising it as work would enhance women's safety.

REALITY: Making brothels, pimping and paying for sex legal would state sanction sexual exploitation and abuse, incentivise sex trafficking, and place legal burdens on women exploited through prostitution.

As the Scottish Government officially recognises, prostitution is a form of violence against women¹⁸. Legalising or 'fully decriminalising' the entire sex trade would make paying for sex, pimping and brothel-keeping legal – thereby state sanctioning sexual exploitation and abuse.

Countries that have legalised or unregulated prostitution regimes have significantly larger sex industries¹⁹. They also experience higher rates of sex trafficking.

A cross-sectional analysis of up to 150 countries found that reported trafficking flows are larger into countries where prostitution is legal²⁰.

conducted an analysis of trafficking in the Netherlands' legalised prostitution trade - notorious for its highly visible window brothels. They concluded: *"The regulation has hidden the legalized sector from the view of the criminal justice system, while human trafficking still thrives behind the legal façade of a legalized prostitution sector. Brothels can even function as legalized outlets for victims of sex trafficking ... the legalization and regulation of the prostitution sector has not driven out organized crime. On the contrary, fighting sex trafficking using the criminal justice system may even be harder in the legalized prostitution sector."*²²

“slacker prostitution laws make it more profitable to traffic persons to a country”

- Jakobsson, N. & Kotsadam, A. (2013) ²⁹

A study of European countries using cross-country data found that sex trafficking was most prevalent in nations with legalised prostitution regimes. In addition to the quantitative analysis, the study's authors reported: *"Case studies of two countries (Norway and Sweden) that have criminalized buying sex support the possibility of a causal link from harsher prostitution laws to reduced trafficking."*²¹

Researchers at VU University Amsterdam

By recognising individuals who sell sex as 'workers', rather than victims of sexual exploitation, countries with legalised or 'decriminalised' prostitution regimes also impose legal obligations on individuals who sell sex - such as tax requirements and health and safety duties. A failure to fulfil these obligations can result in criminal sanction.

In New Zealand, where individuals who are paid for sex are recognised as

workers, an official review of the country's prostitution laws by the Prostitution Law Review Committee found the *"standard position in the industry"*²³ is that individuals who are paid for sex in brothels are 'independent contractors', not employees. As a result, they point out, *"She or he has significant responsibilities under HSE [Health and Safety in Employment Act 1992], and failure to take action to meet these may have serious financial consequences."*²⁴ Furthermore, any person who sells sex in New Zealand can face criminal sanction under the Prostitution Reform Act for failing to adopt 'safer sex practices'²⁵.

If the law recognises women who sell sex as 'workers', rather than victims of sexual exploitation, this also removes the logical impetus for state agencies to provide exiting services to help women leave the sex trade. This logic has been reflected in practice. New Zealand's

Prostitution Law Review Committee noted in its official review of the country's prostitution legislation, which recognises prostitution as 'work', that when it comes to supporting people to exit prostitution, *"adequate resourcing is vital to ensure good service provision"*²⁶. They stated: *"the very fact of decriminalisation may make funding [for exiting services] harder to get."*²⁷ The Committee asked New Zealand's 84 local authorities whether they had done anything to assist individuals to exit the sex trade. Just two said yes²⁸.

“Legal does not make it safe. Legal does make trafficking more unseen in our country. Legal gives the feeling that a lot of things are fine because prostitution happens in a legal environment. But trafficking is also taking place in legal brothels and legal prostitution areas.”

- Sandra Norak, Survivor of sex trafficking in Germany & member of the International Survivors of Trafficking Advisory Council ³⁰

About A Model For Scotland

A Model for Scotland is an alliance of survivors, organisations and frontline service providers calling for a progressive legal model to combat commercial sexual exploitation in Scotland. Get involved at www.amodelforscotland.org

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