Written evidence submitted by Amanda Sebestyen

1. I researched and wrote on the history and current issues of prostitution in Britain as a journalist between 1977 and 1981. From 1997 to the present day I have been working with asylum seekers and refugees. The two concerns come together in my submission to this enquiry.

2. Two of my articles which had most impact are now in the British Library’s digital archive of Spare Rib magazine. One re-evaluated the ‘social purity campaign’ as part of a wider humanitarian movement and a fight for women’s autonomy. These ideas were later explored in more detail by scholars like Lucy Bland and have become part of feminist history-writing. The other article revisited the great campaigner Josephine Butler and her fight for the rights of prostitutes against a system of military brothels. Women, both prostitutes and campaigners, then joined in a National Association for the abolition of prostitution. Inspired even more by the former prostitute women who gave up so much to work for the movement, I wrote that we should lock up the pimps, kerb-crawlers and ‘clients’, not the women. This position has taken real legal form in present-day Scandinavian societies. I am a supporter of this Nordic model, an abolitionist and a defender of the rights of prostitute women.

3. A century after the National Association, the Josephine Butler Society was no longer a fighting organisation but a rescue charity suggesting marriage as a lifestyle solution for women escaping prostitution. But the Society remained the main research organisation, and because it worked so closely with prostitute women its findings were to be taken seriously. I learned that the sex trade in 1970s Britain had some rather unique features. There were very few pimps, and 80% of the women or boys came from inside the UK. The main push towards prostitution was (and remains) female poverty. The typical woman on the game was a mother needing to find money for the gas bill. Older women separately told me how they had been forced into exchanging sex for money during World War II but had later escaped into other paid work.

4. Open street prostitution had been abolished by the time I was working as a member of the NUJ in the 1970s and 1980s, but without proper childcare many mothers were again forced into exchanging sex for money. Areas like Finsbury Park, Commercial Street and Goodsway were furtive and gave an impression of being semi-amateur. The main sex industry around Soho, linked to drugs which increased the dependency of sex workers, was limited in scope and small. I visited some of the rooms in Soho and interviewed women who were trying to start a British branch of COYOTE, the US-based union for prostitutes. Unfortunately it was hard to make personal contact and the attempt fizzled out, while the main US organisation became taken over and funded by the sex industry itself rather than acting as a voice for the women concerned.

5. Throughout this time there was a strange out-rider, the tiny group calling itself the English Collective of Prostitutes. One of its two spokeswomen had replied with an open letter to my proposal in Spare Rib for prosecuting pimps and users. She wrote that pimps were actually ‘the friends’ of prostitute women, and that anything which penalised the clients would also be victimising the women. As I know and often like the people in the
group from which the ECP springs, I am best placed to describe its history. The ECP is one of
the front organisations of a breakaway group from the trotskyist movement, and much of its
thought is influenced by the famous writer CLR James. The group is dedicated and loyal and
does some marvellous organising work with refugees and disabled people, but always brings
everything back to the central demand of wages for housework. It is woman-based but has
never had a good relationship with most of the feminist movement because of its
absolutism and a tendency to split movements in which it takes part.

6. This is emphatically a very small group, more like an extended family, and most members
are now at pensionable age. They double up to help with each other’s campaigns under
different organisational names. They have created a lovely welcoming Crossroads centre
which hosts many radical groups. I admire their dedication greatly but with some caution.
The ECP is surely the smallest and flimsiest of all the Crossroads front groups, and even its
two main members could never have been described as working prostitutes. Its continued
success in appearing a credible voice – and even attracting funding and starting linked
younger organisations such as the self-described Sex Workers’ Academy – is mystifying and
frustrating to many former prostitute women, feminist organisations and NGOs working
with trafficked women. Many of ECP’s supporters clearly have no idea of its radical
worldview and seem to subscribe to the entrepreneurial myth of the Happy Hooker. I can
only assume that support for ECP has kept pace with the vastly extended range of the sex
industry, so that there are now more users and sellers of sexual services who naturally want
to be absolved of guilt and shame. I agree. Guilt and shame are no good for helping
prostitute women get agency over their lives, or getting men to choose a different way of
relating to women other than paying for access. The facts of the immense damage done by
the sex industry however must not be denied.

7. When lived in Australia in the 1980s I saw open street prostitution for the first time and
saw the undisguised domination by pimps who were handed all the women’s money. This
was also the first time that I saw advertising for escorts in ordinary mainstream hotels.
When I returned to England and particularly after 1989, this kind of advertising was
becoming widespread in English hotels, while there were far more strip clubs and
‘gentlemen’s clubs’ in London and other towns. Efforts by councils and residents to combat
the sex trade in their boroughs seemed to be confined to urban re-zoning and motivated by
the desire to preserve house prices rather than help the women.

8. The situation today, as you will know, is the reverse of what was found before 1989. The
vast majority – 80% - of all women engaged in prostitution now come from overseas. They
are without any family networks or other work to fall back on. As well as the widespread
advertising of ‘sexual services’ and proliferation of ‘adult’ TV channels, there are now
Punters’ Guides for clients of prostitutes.

9. I hope that members of the committee of enquiry will read these online Guides in
detail, because they make it very clear that many of the women are being used against
their will and are in distress.

10. It is just as crucial for our agencies to find and rescue these women as to track down
child abuse. Indeed, the two concerns are now linked as child prostitution is an increasingly
common part of trafficking. I distinguish here between trafficking and people-smuggling as I do not want work against prostitution to become part of an anti-immigration agenda. People-smuggling only happens because refugees and migrants cannot come here legally. Victims of trafficking have come under duress or deception. Successive governments have blurred these distinctions, claiming that they are only removing the rights of refugees and migrants as part of a fight against international crime.

11. My most pressing concern is for overseas women found in the UK sex industry to be given protection as trafficking victims, and not to be deported. Whatever decision the commission reaches about the sex trade in general, this is crucial.

12. The closure of Eaves independent service for trafficked women was a tragedy last year; we can only hope against hope that NIA and the Salvation Army between them can start to fill the gap. But central government and local MPs can give a huge lead to the fight against trafficking on the ground in every borough.

13. Two women died in a fire in a locked massage parlour in Royal College Street, around the corner from my home. We know that this was the tip of an iceberg, since the worst of the locked houses exist in rented homes or on estates. Camden Council have undertaken several raids on commercial establishments in Eversholt Street, Chalton Street and around Kings Cross. I arranged for a female immigration lawyer to accompany them, but at the last minute the councillors and Licensing Officer backed off, severing communications with me and the lawyer. This disturbing failure of nerve has been an enduring source of painful concern to me.

14. I am hoping that the government enquiry will stiffen the backbone of those in a position to rescue women from conditions of slavery. Many women may indeed have come here knowing that they were entering the sex industry, but without anticipating the extreme exploitation and compulsion they would face. Others have clearly come expecting other work and been forced into prostitution by threats to their families. It is impossible for them to return ‘home’ after such experiences, and they will just be trafficked on.

15. I am a member of the Feminist Forum, a network of second wave women’s liberation activists who are using their political experience to participate in politics now and in the future. We work together on many issues, but each member speaks for herself.