This is a personal submission and I am writing as a longtime advocate of sex worker rights from the perspective of community organizing and academics. I must first state that your terms of reference position the government in support of maintaining continued criminalization and stigmatization of sex workers, clients and third parties. Your inquiry should be phrased as open-ended questions that support a full exploration of topics and related implications. I feel that this process is biased, however; I am trusting the professionalism of the Home Affairs Committee to include my written evidence and seriously consider what I have to say.

I’m writing this in a very relational way. I know others will be citing literature and various publications that support changes to the current regime. My perspectives on the issue of criminalization of sex work comes from years of direct experience supporting a wide range of active and former sex workers and from years of experience doing research with sex workers, clients and third parties. When I first became involved in these issues in Canada, I believed that patriarchy was the cause of exploitation of women. Due to exposure to more and more people who are involved in commercial sex over the past two decades, I find myself advocating a logic that recognizes sex workers’ human and labour rights, their right to options and choices, their right to transition in or out of sex work with impunity, and their right to live free from stigma irrespective of how they are involved in selling sex. The recognition of rights humanizes sex workers in ways that are necessary to reduce exploitation, stigma and violence. In the simplest of terms, they have to be able to call the police and know that they will be protected and heard. They have to be able to negotiate power among those they encounter who try to stigmatize or extort them. Under the current regime, exploiters use the fact that sex workers have no labour rights and limited legal protection to bully them. They have to be able to use the money they earn to invest in their futures, pay rent, mortgage, tuition, etc. Landlords and members of the community cannot continue to extort and shame them in ways that are currently condoned because sex workers are seen as sinful and dehumanized, or as victims and infantilized.

I appreciate that many view sex work as harmful and as an example of patriarchy and inequality. Some see sex work as inherently harmful and link violence sex workers experience to the work itself and not to the ways that sex workers fall outside of social and legal protections. Stigma, and how sex workers are judged by church groups, radical feminists and conservatives influences public sentiment. I agree that many impoverished adults trade sex as their only option to survive in our global economy that denies access for many to develop the skills to make them marketable. Many people have been made disadvantaged because of unethical ways that wealth is acquired and its unequal distribution due to race, class, gender prejudices, inheritance, and other issues.

I have supported people who trade sex for food and a place to sleep, and I have worked with those who sell sex to pay for tuition, and those who do so to pay off their homes and obtain the ‘extras’ in life, such as vacations, savings accounts and general economic security. Whether people are doing sex work as their only option or are supplementing other incomes, or they experience sex work as an entrepreneurial venture, the amount of control one has over their work environments influences their choices about how they work and what they prioritize. If clients are criminalized they become more rare and harder to acquire. Sex workers may have to reduce prices and make compromises that they would not otherwise have to. Under criminalized regimes, the sex industry becomes a buyer’s market; middle class sex workers (managed and independent) become survival workers, and survival workers fade into obscurity. Adopting the Swedish model (1999) and criminalizing purchase is de facto criminalization of sex work and sex workers. Criminalization is a barrier to exit and it creates chaos and desperation in the lives of sex workers.

In Canada, it has been empirically proven that criminalization causes displacement and the disappearances and subsequent torture and murder of sex workers.¹ The Canadian Supreme Court unanimously voted to decriminalize legal policies that violated the charter rights i.e. ‘security of person’ of sex workers in the Bedford decision.²


² Sixty-
seven women were taken from the streets of Vancouver between the mid-1990s to mid-2000s. The DNA of some were found on the pig farm of William Pickton. Wally Oppal, who led the public inquiry into the missing and murdered women’s case admitted that police failed to protect women because they were sex workers and deemed unworthy. Jason Gratl, independent counsel to the Commissioner of the Missing Women Inquiry wrote in his report entitled “Wouldn’t Piss on Them If They Were on Fire” stated that Vancouver police were unwilling to use their resources to save sex workers’ lives because of prejudice. This exclusion from legal protections is coupled with the stigma that predators, the public and prohibitionists reproduce by depicting sex workers unworthy whores or as hapless victims, and by not acknowledging their human and labour rights. The combined forces of stigmatization and criminalization create very harmful social and legal environments for sex workers and offers them little respite.

I recommend that the UK government:

1. Consult with a wide range of active and former sex workers and those who have experienced domestic and international trafficking. Find safe environments for this consultation to occur with little interference from those with extremist views on the issue and those with power over sex working populations. Due to stigma and criminalization, many who are currently or were previously involved in sex work cannot come forward and share their experiences. Even this process is unsafe for many. You require disclosure of identity and I even feel unsafe participating because I run the risk of being a target for retaliation. I am a PhD student doing sex work research that challenges the dominant narratives. I have a scholarship that can be withdrawn or compromised.

2. End de facto and direct criminalization of sex workers and sex work in order to give sex workers standing under the law and support the amelioration of harms that they identify.

3. Recognize sex workers’ rights within their working environments and support them in gaining control over their industry through use of labour law. In this instance, 3rd parties who exploit sex workers will lose their stronghold. The laws of the land will support sex workers in organizing their labour thus making redundant pimps and exploiters.

4. Increase supports to impoverished populations and raise support payments, disability payments, etc. House, feed and clothe everyone in this country. A living wage must be established. Prioritize people over corporate and profit.

5. In order to eliminate survival sex, reduce the desperation felt by veterans, youth, single parents and the working poor by reinvesting in education, health, treatment, counselling, and career exploration. Those on a crusade to end demand and trafficking, etc. can start with demanding that wealthy countries in forgive foreign debt, and help countries around the world to create employment options for those not fortunate enough to compete for well-paying jobs in the post-modern era.

6. Recognize that the Modern Slavery Act of 2015 is relatively new and does not address the root causes of slavery, nor does it have in it a plan to end the unequal global distribution of resources. It fails to recognize that the most privileged people in the world benefit from inequality and from misguided and misinformed state strategies that deflect attention away from this fact.

7. Create safety in the sex industry through improved working conditions and social and legal protections for workers who choose it AND development of comparable options for people to earn money outside of the sex industry for those who wish to transition out. As a PhD student, my research focus are those who blend sex work and conventional jobs. There is a need to understand what influences the amount of sex work people do and what supports and challenges their existences. We need to learn much more about the sex industry from the perspectives of a diverse cross section of those involved (workers, clients and third parties) before we criminalize and legislate around issues that we know little about as we may cause unintended harm.

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Co-create transition supports with those who have experience with transition and for those who desire to move out of survival sex and careers in sex work, as well as those who live dual lives or who want to leave the industry. These supports need to recognize that some people see sex work as something they escaped from and some see it as an option for their economic security. Still others supplement their conventional jobs with sex work as a long or short term strategy to meet economic goals. There are also those who enjoy sex work and prefer it to other available ways to make a living. All of these perspectives deserve respected.

Recognize the distinction survival sex and sex work, and the distinction between sex work and trafficking.

Accept that the sex industry offers different things for different people. Show a willingness to explore why people hold divergent views on the issues; why some do well in the sex industry and some do not; why it is work for some and not for others.

Focus state resources on reducing poverty and all forms of inequality. Focus police resources on following up rape, assault and the victimization of sex workers. Show predators that they don’t have free reign to violate sex workers because they benefit from police protection like all other citizens.

Help change public sentiment about the ‘unworthiness’ of sex workers by legislating against hate speech just as you do against bullying for other populations.

Recognize the rights of those who trade sex, whether you agree with their reasons or not, accept that they deserve protection while they work and deserve a range of options if they desire transition. Legislation is only one mechanism. If you want to reduce trafficking, survival sex and exploitation then increase opportunities and economic security for all citizens, so no one experiences forced labour.

As for ending demand, we can start with not shaming men and others who like buying sex or who have little ‘luck’ with finding sexual partners and create programs for young people to openly discuss sex and sexuality, masculinity/gender performativity, and the risks and benefits of patronizing adult entertainment (pornography, exotic dance, sexual services, toys, etc.). Education programs can also explore safe outlets for sexual tension, the incorporation of sport and other creative outlets. Ultimately, there will always be a demand for sex, whether it’s criminalized or not because sex is a need not a want. We can only teach people how to respect each other, and expect that those values will follow them in all of their interactions with others throughout their lives.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts.

Submitted by Raven Bowen, PhD Student, Durham University