I am writing to you in my capacity as a therapist who has worked with sex workers, some of whom have been survivors of rape and abuse, and as a feminist who believes that we need to listen to the voices of marginalised women.

Firstly may I take issue with the terms you have put forward around this consultation. Rather than listening to either sex worker organisations, support organisations, the police, the NHS, leading academics or Amnesty International (1) you have chosen to look at sex work around the demand of a few religious and feminist extremists. It is worth noting that the same extremists who support End demand in relation to sex work are those who so shocked Maria Miller in her investigation into the treatment of transgender people in the UK today (2). End demand is an ideological position, which frames some consensual adult sex as unacceptable. Forty years ago similar claims were made about LGB people, however Parliament realised that is wrong in a modern, liberal, democracy for the state to police people’s bedrooms.

We have also taken a harm reduction approach to many issues which mainstream society may disapprove of in the UK. A middle way if you will, which in some ways goes back to the statement of Elizabeth I that she did not seek to make windows into men’s souls. This is I believe an important principle of British democracy, for the state to legislate because it believes certain behaviours are “Un British” (as Sweden sees Sex work as Swedish (3)) runs contrary to fundamental British values or tolerance. Our attitude to harm reduction is also very different to Sweden’s, where for example needle exchange is illegal. We take a far more pragmatic, and I believe realistic approach to avoiding harm.

There is very good evidence that the criminalization of clients puts sex workers at greater risk (4) It has only been proposed or brought into law where a moral objection to sex work is seen to be more important than the safety of sex workers. (5) It also does not work to discourage either sex work or trafficking (6) Sex workers themselves report that when clients are criminalised they feel less able to contact the police, and those who work with the victims of trafficking know how it pushes trafficking underground. It is also important to note that trafficking tends to happen in closed networks (7) with very little overlap with those in the sex industries in the UK. Using sex work laws to attempt to tackle trafficking has been condemned by a number of organisations who work with victims, and migrant people.(8)

On a personal level, I believe that it is important to remove our own moral “would I do that” which seems to inform so much of the debate about sex workers. It can be very difficult to imagine the choices another makes, and therefore we fall into the trap of believing they must have no dignity, or be coerced. Again the parallels with the treatment of LGBT people are clear to me. For many years the medical establishment attempted to cure LGBT people, believing they must be damaged in some way. A similar attitude seems to pervade how many see sex workers. However this attitude ignores that what matters is not that another makes a different choice to us, but that the choice is consensual and does no harm to others.
Around the idea of harm to others some will claim that sex work is damaging because it perpetuates a certain image of women in society. I refer back to my opening remarks, it may or may not, it is not the job of Parliament to legislate for a certain view society should hold. Many would argue page 3 in the Sun perpetuates a negative view of women (8), one would hope however that Parliament would refuse to it.

I have taken it upon myself to research some of the common myths around sex work in order to better understand their experiences. One of the most prevalent is that all, or most sex workers started underage, this is completely false (9) It is based one study, of underage sex workers. The most recent UK research (10) showed that in fact the majority of sex workers began in their 20s, and many had come from jobs such as nursing, highlighting that they had choices and economic agency. This has also been shown in other countries such as India (11) where sex work is seen to provide a better standard of living than other options available.

As someone who also works with the survivors of child abuse, some who were exploited for financial gain as children I think it is vital that we separate wholly the issues of sex work and child sexual exploitation. Unfortunately, as Baroness Jay's report into Rotherham (12) showed victims are often ignored because of the stigma around sex work. We need a robust understanding that there is no such thing as child prostitution, and that the victims are not lesser because their exploiter has received money for their abuse. Currently by conflating two very different issues children are not helped, and sex workers associated with something which they are in no way responsible for.

You will no doubt receive many submissions from people who feel sex work is morally wrong. I ask you to remember that law should not impose one group's morality on another. You will also no doubt hear from others who believe sex workers are deluded, or need rescuing. As a therapist such attitudes are always harmful or disempowering, looking at another and judging their choices never leads to empowerment. There will be some sex workers who do wish to leave sex work, organisations which work with them do not support the criminalization of clients, nor do they judge the sex workers for their choices (13) Instead they offer training, and support into alternatives, but only if this is what an individual wishes. It is vital this be understood. You may not like the fact someone chooses sex work, but only by accepting they do chose it are you able to meet with them and actually work towards positive and beneficial outcomes.

I hope that instead of looking at the criminalization of clients, or the further criminalization of sex work, opposed by sex workers from all over the world (14) you will consider the decriminalization of sex work. Currently sex workers have to work alone in order to work legally. Just this week the danger of that has been shown, with the murder of a sex worker in Aberdeen. New Zealand decriminalized sex work, allowing up to 4 sex workers to share a premises as a collective, with the usual business zoning laws applying. All research has shown that since decriminalization sex workers have been safer, engaged more with support services and the police, and there has neither been an increase in trafficking, or number of sex workers. (15) The legislation has further protected sex workers by allowing them to access employment rights (16)
To summarise, the end demand model is based on an ideological objection to sex work, endangers sex workers, does not work, and is contrary to British values. I hope instead you will move forward the decriminalization of sex work, which is the desired goal of those in the industry, and those who listen to them outside of sex work.

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References


13. https://thetraffickingresearchproject.wordpress.com/2012/09/14/sex-work-and-the-london-2012-olympics-how-was-it-for-you/

