Sex work is on the increase in the UK as a result of austerity and rising poverty. At the same time, sex workers are prevented by the law from working safely and record numbers are facing raids, arrests, prosecution and even prison. Now the Home Affairs Committee is talking again about criminalising clients.

In the past I had a few encounters with sex work, even before I was born, so to speak. A family story was that one of my mother’s cousins (they were both very poor) was picked up by the US military police for soliciting in Venice immediately after the end of World War II. One of my mother’s brother, a prominent figure in the Resistance, went to rescue her. She later married a GI and moved to the US.

In 1968 we were attacked by the police during a demo and some of us repaired into what was then the red light district. Sex workers there pretended to be doing business with us and the police could not tell whether we were customers or demonstrators, so we got away scot free. The role of sex workers resisting (and helping us resisting) police brutality was never highlighted then, but we kept laughing about that for quite a while. Now I think we should have gone back and thanked the sex workers who, who no doubt knew much more about police brutality than us university students.

Finally, in mid October a few years ago, in a sunny and warm Saturday afternoon, in Harlesden, London, with hundreds of people milling about, I was approached by an Asian woman in her forties who asked me if I wanted to do business. I looked at her like I had not understood and she added “Sex?”. I said no thank you and she asked me whether I could give her a pound. I gave her a pound and wished her good luck. How poor that woman must have been to be so quick to cross the line between offering sex for money and begging?

I have no idea whether she was an asylum seeker, had children to feed, a drug habit or what. But who am I to judge? Should I have called the police because she was soliciting against the prostitution laws? Or, if measures against clients are passed,
should I run the risk of being arrested because I could have been at least a potential client?

Sex workers and many of their clients are not different from the millions of people who try and live by their wits in the middle of cuts, austerity and destitution.

Make sex workers safe instead of criminalizing clients.

Giorgio Giandomenici