Written evidence submitted by Laura Lee

I am a sex worker with 22 years of experience in the sex industry. During that time I have worked as a lap dancer, webcam performer, phone sex operator and an on and off street sex worker. I have worked all over Ireland, England and Scotland. Some of the conditions I have worked in could be described as luxurious, some little more than horrific. I will answer each point of reference in turn and have included my email address and contact number should you require any clarification or further assistance.

1. Whether criminal sanction in relation to prostitution should continue to fall more heavily on those who sell sex, rather than those who buy it.

There should be no criminal sanctions whatsoever when consenting adults exchange sex for money. In 2003, New Zealand decriminalised sex work and whilst it’s not a perfect model, sex workers report far improved working conditions and greater safety. The advent of labour rights there saw the first successful case of a sex worker suing her employer, which is where we want to get to in the UK. Sex work is work, a valid form of labour and as such deserves labour rights, not penalisation.

2. What the implications are for prostitution-related offences of the Crown Prosecution Service’s recognition of prostitution as violence against women.

This is a deeply flawed and problematic policy. Prostitution is not violence against women, what’s violent are the nonsensical laws compelling us to work alone and in danger. The law as it stands makes no distinction in brothel keeping laws between women working together for safety and those working for a manager or under any form of duress. What this results in, is a massively increased number of arrests of sex workers which in turn gives them a criminal record which acts as a barrier to exit. There are all sorts of other implications, such as the stigma of attending court and it becoming known that one is a sex worker. The involvement of social services is also quite commonplace. Just because a woman has been arrested for offences pertaining to prostitution, it does not automatically follow that she is a bad mother. The very fact that she is in sex work to support her children is indicative of the complete opposite.

3. What impact the Modern Slavery Act 2015 has had to date on trafficking for purposes of prostitution, what further action is planned, and how effectively the impact is being measured.

The terms of the Palermo Protocol are steadfastly ignored when collating trafficking stats in the UK, in that there doesn’t need to be an element of force or coercion before a sex worker is deemed trafficked. Further, migrant sex workers are regularly conflated with trafficking victims and the often cited figure of 80% is false. Dr. Nic Mai did a study of migrant sex workers in London and found that only 6% of them reported any element of coercion. The sex industry is an attraction to undocumented migrants who wish to support a family as their options are very limited. Rather than targeting the sex industry with criminal sanctions, we should be looking at the driving forces, migrant status being a very good start.
4. Whether further measures are necessary, including legal reforms, to:

Assist those involved in prostitution to exit from it

Exit programs are only effective if the sex worker has made the decision to exit themselves. Enforced exit creates more problems than it solves. I take massive issue with the number of organisations who are funded to the hilt to “raise awareness” and provide support which in reality just doesn’t exist. I would like to see a sex worker led program, in that we are best placed to counsel those who have encountered issues in the industry and wish to start afresh. Again, a criminal record is really not useful here.

Increase the extent to which exploiters are held to account

Trafficking is already an offence, as is rape, kidnapping, sex with a minor or holding a person against their will. Targeting the purchasers of sex is not only erroneous in its aims of tackling trafficking but it is completely misguided in that it affects consenting adults, not those who would abuse and commit violence towards sex workers.

Discourage demand which drives commercial sexual exploitation

Consenting adults paying for sex does not drive commercial sexual exploitation, exploiters do. As sex workers we are best placed on the front line to report anything untoward and we frequently do. In fact, I have done third party reports on behalf of clients too scared to go forward. Any further criminalisation will not reduce demand, as can be seen in Northern Ireland, but rather, it will drive a wedge further between the sex work community and the forces that can stop abuses. Given that a sizeable proportion of men polled in Northern Ireland believed it was already illegal anyway, (before the implementation of the new law on June 1st), and still went ahead, it shows the abject failure of the “End Demand” approach.