I am a PhD student in the field of Infectious Disease Epidemiology, I specialise in Malaria transmission but through wider reading I maintain an interest in HIV. I wish to bring to the attention of the committee some current research findings on the link between the criminalisation of sex work and rates of HIV infection (and other sexually transmitted infections). Unfortunately I only became aware of this call for evidence at a late stage, so this letter is a rough draft of the evidence I think epidemiology can provide for sex work decriminalisation. I would be happy to give further, better prepared evidence at the committee or recommend one of my colleagues that specialises in HIV to do so.

In 2015 the Lancet, a leading UK medical journal, and UNAIDS, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, published a report entitled “Defeating AIDS – Advancing Global Health”. The report aimed set a new agenda on HIV, calling for a global escalation of the response to the HIV epidemic, a large part of the report involved thoroughly reviewing all current evidence on the policies and interventions that work to combat HIV. The report found that “there is strong evidence that the criminalisation of sex work encourages behaviour associated with a high risk of HIV infections and other sexually transmitted infection” (p177). Crucially, the report also highlighted “an over reliance on a biomedical approach alone to the HIV epidemic. Approaches that seek to address the underlying structural and root causes of the epidemic are less promoted.” (p183). It is politically expedient to focus on expensive vaccines and preventative treatments for HIV, rather than decriminalise sex work or hand out clean needles to injecting drug users.

It is worth noting that the rate of HIV infection amongst sex workers in the UK is very low, however the UK should set a political example to other countries where sex workers face even higher levels of stigma, physical violence and discrimination. I wanted to highlight these findings for two reasons. Firstly, it is often thought that criminalising sex workers or their clients will protect sex workers from behaviour that increases the risk of HIV transmission. However, available evidence that has been scrutinised by the most credible sources available says otherwise. Note that the report felt that available evidence called for the complete decriminalisation of sex work, not a “Swedish model” approach. Secondly, even though sex workers in the UK are unlikely to be exposed to HIV by engaging in risky sexual behaviour, this behaviour could easily lead to violence or other sexually transmitted infections. Any form of criminalisation forces sex work to take place behind closed doors, reducing the power of the sex worker to set the terms of the transaction and erodes the ability to seek legal recourse.

Finally, I would like to echo the other evidence for complete decriminalisation (and against the move to criminalise clients) put forward by organisations such as the English Collective of Prostitutes. Even if you personally disagree with someone's decision to undertake sex work, the role of government policy must be to protect its people above the personal condemnations of others. I submitted this evidence to show that international bodies are willing to promote the decriminalisation of sex work when it is proven to be beneficial. It is time for the UK to seriously reconsider its sex work policy, regardless of the political climate.

Yours Sincerely,
Joel Hellewell

The report can be accessed here: [http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736%2815%2960658-4/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736%2815%2960658-4/fulltext)

A separate Lancet series on “HIV and sex workers” details the many different structural
determinants of HIV amongst female sex workers:
http://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736%2814%2960931-4/references

A fact sheet on sex workers created by the English Collective of Prostitutes:
http://www.pledgedecrim.com/#!fact-and-fiction/c9ik