Written evidence submitted by Ric London

1. I am a sex worker. I have been in the trade for some time now. I started for a number of reasons that are irrelevant here but I was not coerced or forced into it in any way. It was my free choice as an adult able to decide what I wanted to do. I chose sex work. I might not be the wisest man but am not illiterate or ignorant. I got a first class degree in Economics by a very relevant London institution and a few other professional qualifications. I am not an exception. People like me might not be the majority but we are quite common in the sex trade.

2. In my life I have been abused at work both verbally and physically, spat on the face, grabbed and pushed around, abused by clients or customers and by those in charge and managers but that was when I was working in retail, catering or offices. Never since I have been a sex worker I have experienced that again. One of the reasons is that I am my own boss and I do not need to put up with the whimsicalities of managers and directors, or paying the consequences of their failure, inadequacies or stress.

3. SHOULD THERE BE ANY CRIMINAL SANCTION RELATED TO SEX TRADE? No. Criminalisation has not worked anywhere in the past and will not work again now. Criminalising the workers only put them in danger of abuse from clients and gangs who will know they have nowhere to get help. Let me remind you that criminal gangs are already breaching the law, so any criminalisation of the supply will only benefit them as they will find much easier to demand protection fees to independent workers, who won’t be able to go to the police as they will be considered criminals and charged. Also it will make the activity of independent workers more difficult. We will either go out of business or have to reach agreements with these gangs that probably will not be of our liking but have no other option but to accept. This will only mean increasing the power and business of the criminal gangs with the increased abuse and exploitation of sex workers that will come with it.

4. CRIMINALISING THE CLIENT will mean putting the client at the level of criminal gangs. Since buying sex makes them criminals some of them will feel more comfortable making business with other criminals in the believe, that as fellow criminals, it will be in their interest to protect them; therefore boosting the business of the criminal gangs. Any measure that pushes clients to criminal organisations is putting them at risk of being abused by them too. They will have very little protection if as victims of criminal behaviour they are treated as criminals. Criminalising the client can be detrimental for independent workers too. Since from the moment he is buying sex there is already a crime committed the different between not abusing sex workers and abusing them will not be perceived as much and the consequences will be so much closer that in the mind of the abuser it will not make much difference and, therefore, he will not have the same incentive to control himself. Hence, a client that is abusive will not have much problem of up-scaling the abuse.

5. Let’s put it with a different example, a bit extreme. Let’s imagine a place where killing someone is punished with death but robbery is not. Someone caught in a robbery will probably surrender. We change the law and we start punishing robbery with death. Someone who will commit robbery and is caught will know he will die and will try to escape regardless the cost and the lives he will need to take in the attempt. The change will not discourage robbery but increases murder. The reasons why someone commits robbery are not addressed so the level of robbery is likely to be the same. The violence however will be higher. This has been known for long time. Thomas More in his “Utopia” (1516) tells about the aristocrat that starts hanging all thieves in his land but still is
surprised because the poor keep on stealing regardless of having thieves hanging from every tree in the land. He does not understand that the measure to take is dealing with the poverty that forced these people into stealing. The level of stealing stayed the same but the hangings increased.

6. It is important to understand what criminalising the paying for sex is really criminalising. The reasons why clients hire sex workers are very diverse. Very often it is the lack of time usually due to overloads of work, not fitting into the mainstream standards of beauty, having a disability, being socially isolated, not having the ability to interact with others to the point of achieving a sexual relation, age, being new in town... just to tell a few. Criminalising buying sex will mean making a crime working too hard, being overweight or unattractive, being disabled, having a colostomy bag, getting older, being clumsy, shy or not charming enough when dealing with others or not knowing the city. Many of these people will not be able to have sex unless the hire a professional. Our services help them to release stress and feel good about themselves too. Sex work offers a service to society too. Restricting their access to sex workers can only increase anxiety, frustration, violence and even sexual assaults or rape.

7. PROSTITUTION AS VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN. A study made by import.io showed that 42% of those selling sex were men. (Please, find the reference in the Telegraph http://bit.ly/1sxdeSQ). This makes the understanding of prostitution as violence against women a bit shaky. Will the law be for women only and leave men alone ignoring them? Is any protection only for women and not for men? If it is violence against women, will it also be violence against men? Will it criminalise buying sex from women but nor from men? More importantly, most of the people involved in the sex trade are not in a situation of violence. According to a study of the Institute of Fiscal Studies which name I cannot remember, those who worked in environments more likely to produce situations of violence and abuse were below 10% and only about 2% suffered what we would call exploitation and abuse on regular bases. Obviously this does not mean that the other 98% never experience any of that. We do, of course, but they are one off situations and not a work and life environment. All traders will have abusive clients at some point; also plumbers, electricians, teachers, GPs, paramedics, fire fighters... politicians too. Everybody I know in the sex trade is comfortable where they are, both men and women, and those who are not simply leave and find another activity. I know more sex workers who have suffered violence and abuse from the police and the legal system than from their clients. This has nothing to be with being a man or a woman. We are all workers and that is how it should be understood. We all have similar problems and concerns. Some will be more particular of women and some of men but overall we are all pretty much in the same industry and we face very similar situations. It is nonsensical making sex trade a women only business and it is ridiculous and incredibly patronising trying to make victims of any of us, men or women, when we are happy, or relatively happy, and feel safe where we are.

8. THE IMPACT OF THE LAW (including MODERN SLAVERY ACT 2015). Any law has an impact only on those who abide it. Criminal gangs and mafias who make their living dealing outside the law will not feel the effects of any change. They don’t care. They are already outside. Any change in the law will only be on their benefit unless it produces a substantial structural change in the adult entertainment industry. This will be achieved by making the life and business of independent workers easier and safer. Only then criminal gangs will feel any impact. It does not matter how much the supply, the demand or both parts of the sex trade are criminalised. Criminals are already criminals; they know it and they do not have a problem with it. In fact criminalising the industry even partially will make it more profitable for them as the competition of the independent workers will be reduced; therefore their prices will go up. They will have more clients and even more
workers, because some struggling independent workers will go out of business or will be force into getting into dealings with them if we do not like it. That happens with anything that is made illegal: the demand does not go down, in fact often in goes up, the price increases and very often the quality of the product drops. If you want a rise of STIs including HIV and Hep C, criminalising is a good move. Criminal gangs will not care at all about the health of their clients and workers. Independent sex workers who are in the trade by their own choice, which is most of us, do care and protect ourselves and our clients.

9. MEASURES TO HELP TO EXIT THE TRADE. I think that is very positive but it needs to take into consideration that not everybody in the sex industry wants to leave. A lot of people will want to leave at some point for whatever reason. Sex work is not something we can write in a CV and therefore we all will have a gap to explain. Probably some might need recycling into what a regular job is and the routine it involves. There are also people who are in the trade as a last resource and will be very glad to leave. It is very important that the any measure to help workers to exit the sex trade takes into consideration that they might not want to and their choice must be accepted. Some surveys show that a high proportion of sex workers would like to leave the industry. I shall not argue that. However that can probably be told about every activity that exists. Most people are unhappy in their jobs and would like to change. However, when most sex workers are confronted with the real alternatives of sex works and the corresponding implications they rather stay in the sex trade. Helping sex workers out of the sex industry necessarily means finding alternative jobs in which they will feel comfortable and that will supply a competitive income. This is normally not the case. Sex workers are alternative people with alternative minds and lifestyles and most will find difficult to constrain themselves in the narrow boundaries of mainstream jobs as we know them.

10. MEASURES TO HOLD EXPLOITERS INTO ACCOUNT. It depends what you consider an exploiter. The fact that two sex workers operating independently but sharing a flat will be class as brothel and therefore tackled by the law does not help. To start it would be good to establish the idea of workers cooperative in which there is not pimp and no one profits apart of the workers. Also it would be good to establish the idea of brothels set up by someone else but that hires workers. This does not mean that the workers are exploited more than the sales assistant in a retailer. It is important to separate clearly the sex exploitation of children and deal with it adequately. The children’s sex trade operates with victims that do not consent and do not have the maturity to be able to consent. The adult sex industry is different. Most of us consent and have the maturity to know what we are consenting to. Any action to tackle trafficking and exploitation will need to focus only and solely on the minority of workers forced and coerced into the sex trade as well as the criminal organisations that try to coerce independent workers into buying ‘protection’.

11. There was the case of some women from Liverpool that came to London to do sex work. They got a flat in Marble Arch area. They worked cooperatively, and one of them would stay in Liverpool taking care of everyone’s children every week. The business was fine. They were successful. Unfortunately, one day someone approached them and told them that they needed ‘protection’ and that they could supply it. The women decided they did not want the protection and shut the business. They had nowhere to go for help as according the law they were running a brothel and therefore breaking the law themselves. Going to the police would have put them all in prison. The situation only benefited the gang selling ‘protection’. The outcome could only be that either they bought, income for the gang, or they shut, no competition for the gang. Either way the criminals won by criminalising something that did not harm anyone. Those criminals were already beyond the law so they cared very little of the consequences of going to
court, get a criminal record and all that. Those women were law abiding citizens and they did care.

12. MEASURES TO DISCOURAGE DEMAND WHICH DRIVES COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION. The only way anything will be achieved is by decriminalising the independent practice and regulating brothels like any other company. Decriminalisation will make reporting abuse much easier, and will give confidence to the victims. Also they will reassure them that they do not need their pimps to operate and make a living. It will allow a few workers to share premises for safety as working alone makes us more vulnerable. Also will make the client feel safer as they know they have rights like in any service, that they are not criminals and that any abuse from the sex worker can be reported safely.

13. CONCLUSION. Criminalising the trade makes no sense. In fact the best weapon against sexual exploitation, trafficking and criminal gangs would be decriminalising it and supporting independent workers and sex workers cooperatives. It will make reporting abuse much easier, more likely and safer. It will also help those being abused or exploited to speak out and get out of their situation. Clients will feel safer in that environment, and therefore will prefer to go there and avoid dodgy establishments where they will be in danger of being abused themselves. This will make trafficking not worth it from a business point of view and anyone in a situation of exploitation will be more confident to denounce it and escape from it.

14. Very most sex workers are not victims and do not need to be saved. We are in the trade by choice. Decriminalisation is working in New Zealand. It is not clear what criminalising clients has done in the Scandinavian countries. It might seem that the trade has decreased, but most likely it has just gone underground and it is undetected. There are also reports of police surveillance of sex workers premises just to arrest clients, which is a waste of police resources and does not make the sex worker feel safe. Regulating the trade with restrictive laws like in many other countries, including the UK now, is of no use to tackle illegal activities like trafficking and exploitation. Decriminalisation might not make trafficking and exploitation disappear, unfortunately it might always exist, but it will make it much more difficult, much easier to report and less appealing for the exploiters; therefore it will decrease. It will produce a fundamental structural change in the industry that will do the job without needing any extra work.