1. Executive Summary

1.1 The following evidence includes:

- An introduction to the Manchester Feminist Network
- Verbal testimony from women who have direct personal and professional experience of prostitution and the harm it causes
- Arguments in favour of criminalising ‘sex’ buyers, decriminalising ‘sex’ sellers and providing support services to women who want to exit prostitution; the Nordic Model
- Recommendations to reduce prostitution and the demand for it, and the harm it causes to women and children

2. Introduction to the Manchester Feminist Network and our evidence

2.1 The Manchester Feminist Network provides the opportunity for feminists across Greater Manchester to network with each other, and plan actions and campaigns against sexism and injustice. We are a women only explicitly feminist network. We have over 1000 members of our Facebook Group and a Collective of 8 women facilitates the network. We conducted a survey to gather evidence to submit to the Inquiry, with a focus on capturing the views and experiences of women who have direct personal or professional experience of prostitution. We considered this was necessary as many women would be put off submitting individual evidence to the Inquiry as their identity is likely to be published online.

2.2 Nearly 40% of the women responding had been involved in prostitution in the past and a similar percentage currently or previously work/ed or volunteer/ed with people in prostitution.

2.3 86% of survey respondents agreed that people who are involved in or survivors of prostitution should be able to submit evidence to the Prostitution Inquiry without having their identity published. Survey respondents stated:

“I think it is very unfair on women who are in or who have survived prostitution to only be able to contribute to the Inquiry if they are prepared to have their identity published. Women who have children may be worried about their children being bullied for their mother having been or being a prostitute, or women may be very concerned about the potential impact on their future employment, particularly in an era where many employers ‘google’ candidates during short listing or prior to interview.”

“We need more voices of exited women involved.”

3. Where Criminal Sanction Should Fall
3.1 The Manchester Feminist Network Collective believes the sex buyers should be criminalised; those who sell 'sex' should not. 48% of survey respondents believed people who buy 'sex' should be criminalised; only 8% believed those who sell 'sex' should be.

3.2 Women’s testimony makes it clear that prostitution was not a ‘free choice’ for which women should be held accountable:

“I believe I felt very low in self worth, confidence was lost emotionally and insecure following sexual violence perpetrated against me by a trusted person. I feel it was one way of feeling I had control over my body, not a healthy decision, but one that reflected my mental and emotional state.”

“In my youth I was in several relationships with men involved in the sex industry, one of whom tried to prostitute me. One such relationship went on for a long time, and I was groomed using porn.”

“(A) woman (I know) was abused in care and went into prostitution initially as a way of making money to care for her daughter. She swiftly became drug addicted and under the control of a local gang. She only escaped when she was sectioned and her family were able to get her to a new home several miles away after she was released from hospital.”

3.3 Women who had worked professionally with prostitutes and sexually exploited young people shared their experiences and view that women who are involved in prostitution have been led their by their life experiences, and are not making a true free choice. It is the buyers of sex that should be accountable for abuse, not the women who have little free will:

“I counseled women in prostitution for 4 years and am currently working to support young women who have been sexually exploited as children, many of which have slipped into prostitution as adults as a result of having been groomed, sexualised and abused. I also counsel some women in private practice who have been in prostitution. Indeed, in the 6 or so years that I have supported women who have gone through this experience I am yet to meet a woman who has entered into prostitution having not been sexually abused, neglected or subject to domestic violence or other dehumanising treatment. The women I have worked with are usually highly traumatised and struggle with ongoing suicidality. They either feel trapped into prostitution by poverty, having no childcare to work or drink/drug addiction, or because they cannot find either work due to having dropped out of school having no/few qualifications or having no CV or references to use in applying for jobs as all they have known is 'sex work'. When research shows again and again that most women have entered prostitution as girls i.e. have been sexually exploited/victims of child abuse, then how can 'sex work' be a job like all others.”

“I have managed a service for young people who were sexually exploited. Whilst it is now much more widely recognised that young people who exchange 'sex' for cash, drugs, alcohol, accommodation or anything else are not making a free consenting choice to have sex, and are being abused, I totally reject the idea that
turning 16 or 18 or any age changes this overnight. There is not a divide between child sexual exploitation and adult prostitution. 'Sex' that is paid for is not sex; it is exploitative sexual abuse within a complete unbalance of power. An older age does not change this. The vast majority of prostitutes first enter prostitution at an age we would now define their experience as child sexual exploitation. Their life experiences before and in sexual exploitation normalise the selling of their bodies, and there is no more truly free consent at 30 than at 15, especially when for many women men taking their bodies and doing what they like with them is what they expect and know. 'It happens anyway, why not get paid for it?!' Coerced and power imbalanced 'sex' is abuse, whatever the age of the person being taken advantage of and abused.”

3.4 Many women expressed views that prostitution should not be viewed as ‘work’, that a strong message should be sent through law about paying for ‘sex’ being fundamentally wrong, and that the sex buyers, usually men, should be held accountable for the abuse they perpetrate:

“Prostitution is a purchase of one human being by another and is inherently wrong. It is not a job. It’s is not an occupation entered into by choice.”

“The lack of criminalisation of people who buy sex creates the suggestion that it is ok, when in fact it is endemic of a social structure that places the desires of men as more important than the physical and emotional well-being of women.”

“I hope this an opportunity to place responsibility for the abuse of women through prostitution firmly with the men who are buying them.”

4. Prostitution as Violence Against Women

4.1 The Manchester Feminist Network Collective wholeheartedly supports the principle that prostitution is violence against women. 48% of survey respondents considered prostitution to be violence against women.

4.2 The implication for prostitution related offences of the Crown Prosecution Service’s recognition of prostitution as violence against women is that the sellers of ‘sex’ should not be prosecuted; they are the victims of sexual violence and abuse. That the buyers of ‘sex’ should be prosecuted for the acts of violence they are committing against women and children. That therapeutic support services should be provided to the women and children who have suffered violence and abuse through prostitution.

4.3 Many women gave personal testimony to the unavoidable violence and abuse involved in prostitution:

“When I was exploited through prostitution I was drugged, assaulted physically and sexually, spat on, forced to watch violent porn, made to act out incest sex scenes, gagged, verbally abused and had my head smashed against a kerb stone to the point of losing consciousness and fracturing my shoulder blade. Men would have sex with me when I was too drunk to stand. They would move child car seats from their cars to make more room to have sex with me. I was sixteen.
There is no other ‘job’ that has these conditions… The emotional scars from being abused in prostitution are life long.”

“I have extreme complex PTSD from 14 years of doing indoors prostitution nearly 30 years ago. This is because of the violence of punters - including mental/sexual/physical torture, 100’s if not 1000’s of rapes or sexual violence, extreme brainwashing.”

“The first one (agency) I worked for was managed by a man. I felt very intimidated by his managing the service to fulfil his own sexual demands on request. I now identify emotionally abusive psychological tactics he employed to give all the girls in competition with one another and loyal to him.”

4.4 Survey respondents cited the impact of violence in prostitution and the wider societal consequences:

“The evidence that prostitution leaves long-lasting psychological damage on people who sell it is overwhelming. There is also overwhelming evidence that the practice is used by and perpetuates people with dangerous and destructive views about women. Prostitution needs to be considered in the framing of class, race and gender violence it is.”

“Prostitution must be the most dangerous ‘job’ in the UK - the violence, the STDs, the rapes, the need to take addictive substances, the PTSD and other mental health illnesses. The trafficking. Apart from the personal cost to each prostituted woman of having to act as if she liked what the man chooses to do to her, the completely unnecessary costs to our NHS are massive: constant antibiotics for STDs, constant treatment to injuries, plus mental health services and the social problems with combining parenting with working as a prostitute.”

4.5 Political discourse on prostitution often includes the opinions of a small but vocal group of ‘sex worker activists’ who promote the idea that prostitution is both a ‘choice’ and a ‘job’ that those who do it are either are very happy to do or find no worse than any other ‘job’, rather than violence against women. A number of women offered analysis on this:

“In my experience whilst women are still prostituting they develop the most amazing capacity to dissociate from the trauma and abuse of prostitution or use substances to help them achieve this. Dissociation is well-documented and reasonable response to trauma, but no one should have to employ this defence daily like putting on a uniform for work. To do so can cause serious psychological and emotional problems and this is what those of us supporting women in prostitution are up against. They may swing from week to week in how they view it i.e. one week whilst prostituting, minimise the impact of their mental health, relationships and self-esteem and the next when they are chronically depressed, full of loathing and suicidal say that they have to exit or they will die. That’s why to ask women engaged in prostitution how they feel about it is a complicated process. Less complicated however, is the idea that to ask the ECP or IUSW, organisations that openly include pimps, madams and people making huge
amounts of money out of the bodies of people less fortunate, their opinion is like asking farmers if they think killing animals should be illegal.”

“There is often a lot of weight given to the views of current 'sex workers', who advocate full legalisation. I think it is important to recognise that anyone in any situation will find psychological ways of coping with a difficult reality. A single Mum I know, who had been in prostitution as a young woman, seriously considered returning to prostitution to provide for her children when she faced financial difficulties. During that time she went from being firmly against prostitution and viewing it as harmful to women, to explaining to me how it would be ok, it "wasn't that bad", and ways she could minimise the risks and harm to herself. Once she had concluded she wouldn't return to prostitution, her views once again swung back to seeing it as something deeply and unavoidably harmful to women.”

5. Impact of the Modern Slavery Act

5.1 The Manchester Feminist Network Collective is not convinced that the Modern Slavery Act has had impact on prostitution as it only addressed trafficking, not prostitution more broadly. The Collective believes this was a mistake, as did many survey respondents:

“Prostitution in the world is a form of slavery. When you get to the point to sell yourself to get out of poverty or other people (your parents or partners) sell your body, you become an object in the hands of the buyers. Where is the law that protects your life? your health? your dignity? you are invisible.”

“According to the definition of trafficking in the Palermo Protocol (which the UK has ratified), the key defining factor in sex trafficking is third party involvement in the exploitation of another person's prostitution; i.e. pimping. Trafficking is a form of slavery and the Palermo Protocol puts a binding obligation on ratifying nations to reduce the demand that leads to the trafficking. That the Modern Slavery Act did not address this is a travesty and an outrage which must be addressed as a matter of urgency.”

“To me prostitution is modern slavery, it's a form of extreme dehumanising exploitation, where one party is commodified and their body is sold for the pleasure or profit of another.”

6. Further Legal Reforms

6.1 The Manchester Feminist Network Collective supports the full introduction of the Nordic Model. 56% of survey respondents believe the 'Nordic Model' (criminalise the sex buyer, decriminalise the seller, provide support services to exit) should be introduced in the UK. Many survey respondents expressed support for the Nordic Model:

“We need to legislate to reduce demand via the proven Nordic Model introduced recently in Ireland and France. And then we need to implement it rigorously so
that demand will go down. In some ways prostitution is like murder - maybe you will never stamp it out completely but you should certainly legislate to educate that it is wrong, to control it and to punish it, or it will proliferate because some humans, mostly men, love a power trip.”

“To achieve social change we need to raise consciousness that all this is not ok, and the Nordic model which forces men to think more deeply about their traditional privileges is the best way to do this. We don't have any other.”

“Studies reveal that the vast majority of those involved in prostitution wish to exit immediately, but need help to do so. We need the Nordic Model in the UK. It has proved to be a highly successful policy in countries such as Sweden and Iceland. Whilst countries such as Germany and New Zealand, who have legalised prostitution in an attempt to make it safer, have seen a dramatic increase in demand and no decrease in violence.”

6.2 84% of survey respondents believed support services should be available to people who want to exit prostitution. This illustrates that even amongst people with different views on legalisation and criminalisation of sex buyers, there is wide spread support for support services to help women exit prostitution:

“There should be more support in helping women leave prostitution and therapy for those in or exiting prostitution.”

“Women seeking to leave prostitution face tremendous barriers to gaining employment, stabilising their emotional and mental well-being, overcoming drug addiction, and finding or maintaining safe accommodation, often including providing for children. The least a decent society should do is help these brave survivors with advice, training, employment and mentoring/befriending schemes, and counselling.”

6.3 Some women expressed their concerns about full legalisation, a focus on ‘harm reduction’ and ‘protected zones’:

“People who think that making prostitution legal will help women are deluded. Men will still rape us, beat us and degrade us, in their eyes that is what they are paying for. The women I knew who were prostituted were all care leavers, homeless, had addictions and we all started before the age of 18. We had all been raped or sexually abused prior to being abused through prostitution. It is never ok to buy another human being, and prostitution is purchase of people who are already abused, vulnerable and often alone.”

“Harm minimisation projects whilst doing some good work in preventing the spread of disease and promoting ‘clean’ drug use, seem to me to normalise something that is deeply wrong and abnormal in a civilised and egalitarian society ie that it is acceptable for women’s bodies to be bought or sold. Instead of funding to reduce demand and criminalise buyers as the nordic model proposes, funding projects that befriend pimps and brothel owners says that these women are only worth what their sex buys them. It turns a blind eye to the suffering and/or exploitation that has invariably occurred for a young girl to relinquish dreams of a
career or profession to risk her mental and physical well-being in what is
recognised as an ‘occupation’ with frequent hazards such as rape, violence and
murder.”

“Please bear in mind that in the Leeds ‘Toleration Zone’ one woman was
murdered and several assaulted despite the fact that this was supposed to be a
safe and protected area. It is often said that ‘Prostitution is the oldest profession
in the world’ as a way of justifying its continued existence. You could say the
same about murder. The prostitution quote actually dates from Kipling in the 19th
century - maybe not such a good justification then.”

6.4 Some survey respondents highlighted broader issues that needed to be addressed,
including employment, housing, welfare and asylum systems:

“There should be more robust strategies in place to identify and assist victims of
trafficking. They should be safeguarded from standard asylum processes.”

“Cuts to social services, welfare and lack of access to good education makes
these young people more vulnerable to getting into abusive relationships. It’s all
on a spectrum. People need education about what’s could be deemed as abusive
in a relationship. Until the government and/or the job market offers well-paid jobs
with good conditions that people can actually live on and have a good work-life
balance, there will always be people who will do sex work as it might work out
marginally better than doing some horrible exploitative job.”

“Prostitutes are very vulnerable and should be protected by law and have a safe
place to stay.”

6.5 Many women suggested that there was a need for educating young people and
challenging the wider ‘sex industry’ and culture that sexualises and objectifies women
including pornography:

“Better sexual education in schools both for parents and students could help.
Awareness of harm of violent porn both to young men and women.”

“We need a cultural change in the way the sex industries are viewed by the
public. This means attacking all forms of sex industry - pornography and
lapdancing as well as prostitution - and porn culture in mainstream media and
advertising.”

“I think sex education for young people should include the realities of prostitution
and the harm it does particularly to women and children. Young men should be
educated to understand that prostitution is harmful, dehumanising and degrading
to women, and an exchange of money is in no way real consent. This should be
delivered using youth work methodology and informal education through schools
and by organisations such as Brook.”

“To reduce demand, we need a radical shift in attitudes to stop men seeing
women as inferior and existing to serve their egos. So much of this is fueled by
pornography. We need to get to a place where men do not wish to view porn, not
because they feel guilty about it, but because they find the idea of treating women like dehumanised masturbation objects to be abhorrent and a sexual turn-off.”

7. Recommendations

7.1 The Manchester Feminist Network Collective recommends:

- Women are given the opportunity to give anonymous verbal and written testimony to the Inquiry.
- Sex buyers are criminalised for the abuse they perpetrate; selling sex is decriminalised.
- Priority is given to funding services that are explicitly for women wanting to exit prostitution. These services should include advice and guidance on matters such as claiming benefits and gaining employment, access to education and employment trial schemes, mentoring and befriending, therapeutic counselling, and access to safe secure housing.
- Awareness raising campaigns are developed to educate the general public about the harm of prostitution and challenge attitudes that objectify and sexualise women.
- Informal education projects are funded to educate young people about the harm of prostitution and challenge attitudes that objectify and sexualise women.

7.2 The Manchester Feminist Network can be contacted for further information at manchesterfeministnetwork@riseup.net