I am submitting evidence to the inquiry in a personal capacity, as a woman who cares about the safety and equality of all women and girls.

**The danger of the ‘normalising’ of the sex industry**

**Ethical and moral implications of any legislation**

**The effects of the sex trade on women as a class**

1. It has become fashionable to use the term ‘sex work’ in reference to prostitution, and the normalisation inherent in treating it like any other job is intended to conceal what prostitution actually involves. This makes it easier to talk about workers’ rights and harder to argue with them. The term ‘sex work’ serves to sanitise the realities of a lifestyle which, for most of the women involved, is dangerous, painful, demeaning, repugnant and dehumanising. It conceals the difficult fact that the ‘work’ requires a woman to accept penetration in her most intimate places – mouth, vagina, anus – by men she may find physically repulsive, over and over and over again. There is currently no way any work-place health and safety regulation would allow this, and this should tell us something. I think we need to acknowledge the uncomfortable truth before we can decide on legislation.

2. To position prostitution as a job like any other puts all women at risk. With no state regulation in place to restrict the industry, a last form of defence is taken away from the most vulnerable of young women who are already at risk from coercion or exploitation. In Germany where prostitution is legalised, a common form of coercion is the ‘lover-boy method’, where a so-called boyfriend will persuade a girl into working in a brothel and there is no barrier of illegality that she can draw on to protect her. More than that, there is a highly visible brothel culture which can make it seem like everyone else is happy with it and it is you who is odd to be resisting. For the state not to take a stance compounds the pressure. Trafficking is not as necessary when girls can be effectively groomed by the prevailing ‘norms’.

3. There is a moral and ethical side to the prostitution debate which cannot be swept to one side by the new terminology, and should not be ignored by legislation. Just as we have laws around organ harvesting and assisted suicide, in order to protect those who would be exploited by the practices, we need to protect the (predominantly) women and girls who would be exploited by a relaxation in the laws surrounding prostitution. A minority of ‘sex workers’ freely choose their work and wish to keep doing it, but surveys consistently show that 85-95% of prostitutes would leave the work if they could (and this of course would be even higher if we could reach those who are held against their will and not allowed to take part in surveys). The majority of women are there not through choice but through need, and should not be treated as criminals. However, full decriminalisation would remove the barriers to expansion which are currently in place, and market forces would be free to reign. There will never be enough women to meet demand and increased demand will lead to more trafficking.

4. Safety for ‘sex workers’ is paramount and much needs to be done regarding police response and attitudes, so that prostitutes are not treated as second class citizens without access to justice. However, when appraising safety issues, you cannot lose
sight of the fact that not being in the industry at all is the only way to guarantee that safety, and if legislation helps to expand the industry then many more women and girls will be at risk. It is better in the long run to tackle demand so that fewer people in the future will be exposed to the risks. Though ‘sex workers’ say their safety will be compromised by a sex-buyer law, this is not borne out by evidence regarding the Nordic model, which has been shown to reduce demand and reduce serious attacks. Apart from the safety issues regarding assaults, there is also the issue of long-term health (physical, mental and emotional), which can only be tackled by reducing the numbers involved. Survivors of the sex trade suffer rates of PTSD comparable to war veterans, and the effects of disassociation similar to rape victims. With or without laws to protect current workers, this is a lifestyle which can never be made healthy for women.

If the demand for paid sex is effectively state-sanctioned by decriminalisation, this sends out a very powerful message. It might help to de-stigmatise ‘sex work’, which is beneficial to the ‘sex workers’ themselves, but the unintended consequence is that it also de-stigmatises the buyers and the pimps, making it easier to exploit women for their bodies. Ultimately, it may sound harsh, but it is better for women as a class if prostitution retains its stigma. The alternative would be infinitely worse: state-sanctioned prostitution, state-sanctioned pimping, state-sanctioned use of women’s bodies for abuse and profit. The sex industry, whether porn or prostitution, is profoundly anti-women. It delights in taking pleasure from women’s pain, or, at best, ignoring women’s pleasure. The ordinary woman in the street does not benefit from a system which tells her there is a ready supply of women paid to do the demeaning and/or painful things she doesn’t want to do herself. We need to focus on the reasons for the demand, and ways of reducing the demand.

The equality issue should be uppermost in our minds when considering legislation of the sex industry. Women cannot be equal while there is a thriving sex industry: the fact that a few have chosen it does not mean it is not detrimental to the many. The only way to work towards equality for women is to reduce demand for paid sex and to provide exit strategies to help women leave the trade. I believe the Nordic model is the best way of achieving this and I hope the inquiry will look at all the evidence for this and take seriously the needs of women as a class when deciding on legislation. Current ‘sex workers’ have a voice and should be listened to, but with the caveat that the term ‘sex workers’ also include pimps, managers and others who profit from the trade, and who have the resources to promote their views. I hope the inquiry will give just as much weight to the stories of survivors, who speak for the many who do not have a voice, and tell their stories despite a lack of resources, and in some cases whilst still suffering from the trauma resulting from their experiences. In many ways their stories are harder to hear, but that makes it even more important that we take them into account. Decriminalising all aspects of the sex trade would pave the way for many more such stories in the future, and we should all be working towards ensuring that this is not possible.