Introduction

The National Union of Students (NUS) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the select committee’s inquiry into prostitution.

NUS is a voluntary membership organization which makes a real difference to the lives of students and its member students' unions. We are a confederation of 600 students' unions, amounting to more than 95 per cent of all higher and further education unions in the UK. Through our member students' unions, we represent the interests of more than seven million students.

In 2015, Swansea University, in partnership with NUS and other stakeholders, published the findings of a three-year report into student sex work.\(^1\) The comments made in this consultation are based on the findings of this report as well as international research. Our response focuses on the enquiries’ terms of reference: ‘whether criminal sanction in relation to prostitution should continue to fall more heavily on those who sell sex, rather than those who buy it.’

The criminalization of buyers of sex

**NUS strongly opposes any policy which seeks to criminalize those who buy sex.** We believe further criminalization of the sex industry will only put sex workers, including student sex workers, in danger. Reports from sex workers in Northern Ireland where it has recently become illegal to pay for sex already suggest that this has had a detrimental impact on sex workers ability to work safely, such as forcing them to work in isolation which puts them at greater risk of attack.\(^2\)

In accordance with Amnesty International, we support full decriminalization of sex work and call on the UK Government to provide resources in the form of state benefits, education and training and/or alternative employment to help sex workers leave prostitution if they want. Support should include financial help for students who want to enter further and higher education but who face particular financial hardship. This will ensure students do not feel forced to do sex work in order to continue their education.\(^3\)

We believe full decriminalization is necessary based on the substantial evidence that where prostitution has been decriminalized, it has had a positive impact on many sex workers working conditions. In New Zealand, where sex work has been decriminalized since 2003, the majority of sex workers (70%) felt that they were more likely to report incidents of violence. This was particularly true for street workers.\(^4\) More recent research from the Christchurch School of Medicine review found over 90% of sex workers believed decriminalization gave them additional employment, legal, health and safety rights. Many found it easier to refuse clients and said police attitudes to sex workers had changed for the better.

In the UK we believe decriminalization will:

- remove the possibility of sex workers getting criminal records. This will help improve access to jobs for those sex workers who want to leave the industry.
- increase the safety of sex workers – sex workers could work together in a supportive environment.
- enhance the health of sex workers - sex workers should be able to access services without discrimination.
- increase protection for migrant sex workers. Currently many migrant sex workers are vulnerable to raids and exploitation.
- reduce the stigma attached to sex work which brings violence and discrimination.
- bring great recognition to sex workers’ contributions to our society - most sex workers are mothers supporting families and communities.

Impact of criminalization for student sex workers
In addition to the implications outlined above we believe there will be additional consequences for student sex workers if buying sex is made illegal. We believe that the current law already has negative consequences for student sex workers.

Our research on student sex work found that many staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) did not understand what activities related to the sex industry are legal or illegal. Changes to the law increasing criminalization will only increase misunderstandings around the law and sex work and increase stigma and discrimination surrounding student sex work. The report showed currently many staff who are aware of student sex workers are primarily concerned about the reputational damage to their institution as a result of a disclosure rather than offering support to the student sex worker. Anecdotally we have also come across instances where student sex workers felt forced to leave their course because of responses from staff and students at their institution.

Instead of focusing on further regulation and criminalization of sex work we believe that much more work needs to be done in training HE staff to feel confident in dealing with any student who discloses they work in the sex industry. Guidance and training should particularly focus on:

- The diversity of occupations within the sex industry;
- The legalities of sex work;
- Stereotyping and stigma;
- The needs of student sex workers;
- Anti-discrimination protections and available student support;
- Appropriate protocols in case a student experienced;
- Sexual violence and assault.

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ii Please see *The Scotsman*
iii Please see *The Student Sex Work Project: Research summary*. The report found that financial hardship is a principal motivating factor for students to pick up work in the sex industry. Continued efforts need to be made by HEIs to locate those students who do not succeed in getting the financial support they need.
v Please see [http://www.otago.ac.nz/christchurch/otago018607.pdf](http://www.otago.ac.nz/christchurch/otago018607.pdf)