1. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1.1 This submission is made by the Trustees, staff and service users of Trust Women’s Project charity (hereafter Trust).

1.2 We are submitting evidence because we have amassed expertise in the challenges faced by women who want to exit prostitution. Our charity is focused on supporting women involved in, exploited through and exiting prostitution in south London, with a view to enabling them – emotionally and practically – to make safer choices and have better life chances. We achieve this by delivering outreach, drop in, group work, volunteering and peer mentoring programmes.

1.3 We have addressed three main issues in our submission these are summarised below:

- **Regarding whether criminal sanction in relation to prostitution should continue to fall more heavily on those who sell sex, rather than those who buy it.**

- Our practice-based evidence reveals that women involved in prostitution are often victims of violent crime which can include offences such as physical, sexual violence and rape. Those who perpetrate such offences are identified as male clients buying sex and or male exploiters/ ‘pimps’ benefitting from the sale of sex. Trust believes that the onus, accountability and/or sanction should be placed on those who buy sex and we support the call for the ‘Sex Buyer Law’\(^1\) – specifically to decriminalise those who sell sex and to provide support for those exploited through it.

- The women who use our services tell us that for them, prostitution is a degrading and exploitative experience and that they become involved, because they are coerced and/or financially desperate. It destroys

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\(^1\) The campaign for the Sex Buyer Law from End Demand: http://enddemand.uk/
their confidence and self-esteem. Our position on prostitution is driven by such narratives and reinforced by our work with women exploited through it. We therefore believe that prostitution is a system which harms women and perpetuates gender inequality and to a greater extent a violation of women’s human rights. Decriminalising the prostitution ‘system’ would for us mean that women’s equality and human rights cannot be adequately protected.

- We agree with the statements made in the APPG Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade report 2014 – ‘the current legal burden of criminality in the UK is wholly inappropriate to the harms associated with prostitution’⁴ ‘In our experience women are still burdened with criminality and it is difficult for them and indeed for us to advocate on their behalf, when their vulnerabilities, experiences of violence and control are not prioritised and/or ignored.

- Regarding: What the implications are for prostitution-related offences of the Crown Prosecution Service’s recognition of prostitution as violence against women.

- The Crown Prosecution Service recognition that prostitution is a form of violence against women, because of its gendered nature, is relevant to our project, our clients and the principles which underpin our work. The main implications which arise for our clients is one of credibility charging and court processes. Women are aware of that they are perceived as a ‘social problem’ and or powerless. We can evidence countless scenarios where women are blamed and framed as complicit in and responsible for the crimes perpetrated against them. The stigma attached to their involvement in prostitution for many women means that, they do not report crimes to the police and giving evidence in court as witness is a rarity.

- Regarding: Whether further measures are necessary, including legal reforms, to: assist those involved in prostitution to exit from

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⁴ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade, March 2014, Shifting the Burden: Inquiry to assess the operation of the current legal settlement on prostitution in England and Wales
it; increase the extent to which exploiters are held to account; and
discourage demand which drives commercial sexual exploitation

- We believe that it is necessary to assist those involved in prostitution to
  exit from it and this is our core aim. The women we work with want to
  leave prostitution but do not know how to, because their negative
  trajectories and vulnerabilities are deeply set by the time they approach
  us or we offer help. We work intensively with women to address their
  presenting problems such as drug and alcohol dependency, stigma,
  isolation, poverty and homelessness. We are also effective in helping
  women to recover / cope with trauma experienced from exploitation
  and violence in childhood and adolescence.

- We know that our clients have a right to receive the type of service we
  provide under the EU Victims Directive\(^3\) and the Istanbul Convention\(^4\).
  However our future is adversely affected by funding cuts and
  competitive tendering processes. The solution we feel is to prioritise
  funding for specialist services like Trust as noted in one study:
  ‘Providing dedicated support to help women who want to exit [is] found
  to be an extremely cost-effective way of preventing further physical or
  emotional harm associated with their continued involvement in
  prostitution.’\(^5\)

1.4 We would be happy to provide a Trustee or member of staff and, if available
and appropriate, our clients to attend, to give oral evidence to the Committee.

2. **ABOUT TRUST**

2.1 Trust was founded 11 years ago out of concern for women in street
prostitution working on Tooting Bec Common and now has clients across
South London. In Lambeth there are an estimated 150 women involved in
street prostitution. (Lambeth Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy


\(^4\) [https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168046031c](https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168046031c)

Our internal statistics reveal that in the period October-December 2015, 73 women approached the street outreach team for help. Every week, we run street outreach sessions where our staff are out until the early hours to talk to women on the street, offer them condoms, snacks, needle exchange, personal safety advice, friendly support and to direct them towards our exit services.

2.2 At our offices in Streatham we take a holistic and personalised approach to supporting women. This is because women present with complex histories and interlocking needs. We help them find hostel places and medical care, support them through pregnancies, attend court proceedings when they face imprisonment or seek to prosecute violent punters.

2.3 We have never met a woman who “chose” street prostitution as a career. Women will readily say they “hate” what they are compelled to do but could see no way of stopping. Our clients report that they receive pitiful sums of money (sex and/or sex acts for less than £20) on Brixton Hill because they are homeless, in poverty, want to buy drugs or are coerced by male pimps and or abusive ‘boyfriends’.

2.4 Most were sexually and physically abused as children – either by family members or other trusted adults (see the case studies below) – a majority were at some point in the care system. Few attended school beyond the age of 14 (a common age where sexual exploitation begins). Most have mental health issues and are traumatised as a consequence of their abuse, together with appalling physical health, both from the toll prostitution takes on their bodies and (as people on the margins of society) from not being registered with GPs etc.

2.5 The lives of our clients take a very similar trajectory: looking for love as teenagers, they fall in with older men, who purport to be their boyfriends and push them into prostitution whether by coercion, emotional blackmail or violence. Often they are sent onto the street to fund the drug habits of these men. The majority of our clients have one or more addictions of their own.

2.6 Street prostitution exposes them to violence (our clients report being routinely raped by punters – we had three reports of rape over the Christmas 2015
period), they are frequently imprisoned for prostitution-related offences which means they leave jail homeless and vulnerable, with little alternative but to return to prostitution.

3. **OUR CLIENTS: THREE CASE STUDIES**

We use women’s narratives of their personal experiences and how Trust has helped them to improve the way we run our services. Women are always keen to share their stories to raise awareness about the complexities of their issues and needs. The following case studies are typical examples of the predicaments of the women we help (names have been changed to safeguard confidentiality).

**Ellie**

3.1 Ellie’s mother, aunts and even grandmother all worked in prostitution: her father was a pimp. She and her older sister were abused first by family members, then by their mother’s own clients. “I cannot remember a time in my childhood before the sexual abuse began,” she says.

3.2 When she was seven years old, her mother, while drunk and high on drugs, threw her out of a high window. Ellie needed major surgery to a shattered skull and was told by her mother to lie to doctors and say that she fell.

3.3 Highly disturbed and disruptive at school, she was taken into a secure children’s unit aged 10. She was there for two years and staff did nothing to prevent sexual abuse by young male residents. Attempts at fostering failed because she was too emotionally disturbed: “one family asked me what I wanted to eat for dinner and I was amazed. It had always been ‘eat that or go without’. I couldn’t believe families lived in such a kind way.”

3.4 At 13, while still at the children’s home, she met a 40-year-old man who plied her with gifts and longed-for affection. While purporting to be her boyfriend, he introduced her to other men who paid him to have sex with Ellie. “I thought he liked me,” she says. “I did it to please him. It made me feel grown up. All the women I grew up with were sold sex, working in massage parlours or on the street: it was just normal to me.” Many of Ellie’s clients liked her to turn up in school uniform.
3.5 Aged 17, she escaped her pimp by leaving for London with another man with whom she immediately became pregnant. She had four children, but during this time developed an addiction to crack cocaine. When her eldest was eight, her children were taken into care. She had four subsequent pregnancies and the babies were taken away from her and adopted at just a few months old.

3.6 To feed her crack habit, she continued to sell sex on street and to shoplift. She has served numerous short-term prison sentences, and often found herself homeless on being released.

Sharon

3.7 Both Sharon’s parents were heroin users; her mother was also a manic depressive. Sharon grew up in and out of the London care home system. When she was 17, a boyfriend introduced her to drugs and encouraged her into prostitution to fund both their addictions.

3.8 Working on street selling sex, Sharon, now 25, has been raped many times and made to perform degrading acts (including bestiality) with clients. Her heroin addiction makes her reckless and, because she loathes having sex with punters, she often tries to steal their money and run off. This puts her in great peril: several men have tracked her down, beaten her unconscious and raped her.

3.9 Her drug habit and chaotic lifestyle have left her homeless many times, sometimes sleeping in crack houses, forced to have sex just for a roof over her head. Her desperation for drug money means she often has unprotected sex and has contracted several sexually transmitted infections. She has given birth to two children, both adopted as babies.

Leona

3.10 Growing up in London, Leona had an abusive mother who would often hit her, once fracturing her skull. She was told to explain to social workers and teachers that she was just clumsy. Her mother was a prostitute and forced Leona onto the street herself at the age of 12 to pay for her drug habit.

3.11 Later Leona escaped her family and started a new life for herself, having two children. But after her mother was raped and murdered by a client, Leona had
a breakdown, started using crack, and her children were removed from her aged 10 and 4.

3.12 After this, her life spiralled downwards and she became homeless, sleeping in alleyways and parks. She was raped by a client who caused her appalling internal damage. This means she is forced to wear a tampon in her anus to stop leakage. Her ex-partner has stalked and attacked her, once biting flesh off her back.

4. WHAT WE BELIEVE

4.1 Our fundamental belief is that prostitution is an inherently abusive system in which men are exploiting vulnerable women, whose complex histories mean they have virtually no choice but to sell sexual services. We align our practice to the CPS for recognition that prostitution is a form of violence against women.

4.2 Criminal sanctions should be lifted from those who sell sex. The women Trust works with are very much victims: of abusive childhoods, exploitative men and routine violence from punters. If you look at the cases of girls groomed and sexually trafficked by "boyfriends" in Rotherham and other cities, our clients are these girls a decade or so later. We consulted a small representative group of our clients on this issue. They supported our view and expressed that far too much emphasis was placed on them, their activities and their behaviour, instead of the root causes around their pathways into prostitution, i.e. their experiences of trauma and exploitation as children. Women felt that the way to hold ‘pimps’ and exploiters to account would be to ‘follow their money and get their money’. The women we interviewed said that because of fear, violence and intimidation, women will not report and so a more covert way to protect them would be to disrupt the pimp’s business.

4.3 Trust does not believe, therefore, that women should be criminalised. At present they inhabit a constant cycle within the criminal justice system: they are arrested, go to court, are sometimes sent to prison for short spells and – rendered homeless and penniless, with no help to improve their lives – are back out on the streets. Trust believes it is imperative that we break this cycle.
4.4 From our work, Trust recognises that women involved in prostitution experience disproportionately high levels of sexual and physical violence and emotional abuse. At Trust it is a rare week when we do not hear of a punter raping one of our clients, although very few will report such crimes to the police.

4.5 Getting caught up in the criminal justice cycle creates a fear of any state authority and a fear of the consequences of coming forward to report crimes, violence or abuse from the men they encounter. Rape and violence are therefore under-reported, and dangerous men continue to harm others.

4.6 The impact of the criminal justice system is to take away choice, perpetuate abuse and keep the women firmly locked in the spiral of poverty, instead of engaging with a range of services in a holistic and joined up way, which could help them on the road to recovery.

4.7 The fact that women are themselves criminalised naturally adds to their distrust and fear of the law. It also inhibits them from accessing services which would help them leave prostitution. In fact, criminalisation only entrenches their marginalisation.

4.8 **It is important to ensure that some funds are targeted at treating ‘the whole woman’ if women are to be assisted to exit prostitution. Our approach is very much aligned with the ‘Nordic model’, which is based around offering support services to – and not criminalising – women involved in prostitution.**

4.9 Women engaged in street prostitution are the most vulnerable in society – 90% are struggling with addiction (crack, heroin, alcohol etc.), many are homeless and a significant number suffer from mental health problems, exacerbated by the trauma they regularly experience. It is an extremely risky and dangerous area of the sex industry.

4.10 Our extensive experience with clients over many years has consistently demonstrated to us that women in prostitution overwhelmingly wish to leave. However, exiting is extremely difficult: it often entails simultaneously solving many complex problems. These may include homelessness, getting therapy
for mental health issues, rehabilitation from drug addiction and addressing
crippingly low levels of self-esteem.

4.11 These women are not criminals and do not deserve to be criminalised, instead
they need support, links to services (social security/ health – mental and
physical / housing / training/ rehabilitation / access to their children etc.) which
can assist them in taking that first step towards breaking the cycle of
depression and inequality. These women need intensive help to engage with
support services on their own terms. They also need help with all the issues
that may have led to involvement in the first place, and pathways to change
are unlikely to be linear. Our experience is that there are frequently many
reverses (often induced by moments of high stress, e.g. the prospect of
testifying against a violent pimp) and that change needs to be negotiated
through small, incremental steps and a consistency of support.

4.12 Many women in prostitution feel they are worthless, their lives don’t matter so
they take dangerous risks – one attendee at a group work course wrote about
‘finding a voice to laugh again’ having felt suicidal and suffering flashbacks
and nightmares; another described the charity making “me feel like I wasn’t
just a dirty crack whore”.

4.13 It is easy to underestimate the kind of ‘therapeutic’ interventions needed to
support women out of prostitution. They need to feel they have value (see, for
example, Ellie’s stories), that they have agency in their lives and that
victimhood is neither all they can expect nor what they deserve.

4.14 Trust’s first objective is to help them realise they have a right to a better life.

4.15 We need a change in rhetoric and culture around how women involved
in prostitution are treated by statutory services, by the police, by the
criminal justice system and by the press. Abuse, exclusion and poverty
drive women into prostitution and trap them into a life on the streets. We have
yet to meet anyone in our client group for whom this is ‘a lifestyle choice’.

4.16 People involved in the demand for sex, or organising frameworks that
help to service that demand (whether punters, traffickers, pimps, people
running brothels or parlours), are essentially criminals, and should be
treated as such. We support the prosecution of people involved in exploiting
women as commodities, and do not support any attempts to facilitate the commercial exploitation of women. Any initiative to decriminalise men buying sex from women would only perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes around power, control, violence and financial inequality, which are already hugely damaging to the prospects of an equal society.

Conclusion

4.17 We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence for the Prostitution Inquiry as a small independent charity working at grassroots. Any work which challenges the normalisation of prostitution is progress for us. We are encouraged by moves such as the ban on the advertisement of sex industry jobs in jobcentres. We would like however clearer direction from government on its aims and strategy around prostitution and finally ring fenced funding for projects like ours that provide lifeline support and advocacy for women who are vulnerable and trapped in prostitution.

End.