Background
SAY Women is a voluntary sector organisation that supports young survivors, aged 16 to 25 years, of childhood sexual abuse, rape / sexual assault and other forms of sexual violence, who are at risk of / experienced homelessness. We provide supported accommodation, 1:1 emotional and practical support and groupwork. We also provide a national training service to workers across all sectors.

SAY Women was created when a CHAR report (1992) highlighted that 4 in 10 young women who were homeless had become so due to their experience childhood sexual abuse. The vast majority of young women using our service are referred due to childhood sexual abuse, but have continued to experience further violence against women afterwards, this, we would recognise, includes involvement in prostitution. This is in line with Liz Kelly’s Continuum of Violence Against Women (Kelly, L. Surviving Sexual Violence, 1988), which recognises the vulnerability caused by sexual violence, the negative impact on support networks for the survivor and therefore the vulnerability to further targeting by abusers. For these reasons we recognise prostitution as an equality issue, particularly as the majority of those exploited through prostitution are women and the majority of those paying for sexual services are men, regardless of the gender of the person involved in prostitution.

SAY Women for many years has recognised that many survivors of childhood sexual abuse will function highly in our society and will require limited, if any, support from services. The survivors who approach services often are experiencing difficulties in addition to the impact of the trauma they have experienced. This may be ongoing abuse, isolation, limited support networks and / or poverty. This combination of historical abuse and current social difficulties can lead to issues, such as negative coping mechanisms, mental health difficulties and homelessness etc. SAY Women supports young survivors to overcome these difficulties, but it is our experience that these can leave the young women vulnerable to further abuse through commercial sexual exploitation, for the purposes of this inquiry prostitution. This is supported by research that consistently highlights that survivors of childhood sexual abuse are over represented amongst women involved in prostitution. (Farley & Barkan, Finkelhor & Browne, Widom, Home Office)

Should criminal sanctions in relation to prostitution continue to fall more heavily on those who sell sex, rather than those who buy it?
For too long vulnerable women have been held responsible for the impacts of prostitution, in effect seen as in control of the exploitation they experience and the intent behind the crime. SAY Women would prefer the UK Government to explore the potential use of aspects of the Nordic Model, which recognises the control and intent with men exploiting others through prostitution. This would reflect UK strategy and legislation that not only attempts to address and reduce violence against women, but also recognises the links between the various forms of violence against women. This is vital if we are to not only recognise the impact of coercive control at various stages of the lifecycle and but also its effect on women’s vulnerability to further targeting by exploiters and abusers.

SAY Women also recognises the prostitution experienced by vulnerable survivors as contrary to the Declaration of Human Rights for example, “.. all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” and believe that any legislation should reflect their experience and need for protection and support.

As a society we have moved away from viewing men who buy sexual services as out of control of their impulses. We now recognise the buying of sexual services as an exploitation of power and is therefore, in our opinion, is an equality issue. As such SAY Women believe it is a contradiction for women, in a position of inequality, to be subject to the law, criminal or otherwise, in relation to soliciting or prostitution. Furthermore research has shown that women involved in prostitution, often experience high levels of drug and alcohol use in order to cope with the ongoing trauma of unwanted and often violent sex, (Hughes, Young et al, alcohol Research UK). It is SAY Women’s experience that the young women in our service, most vulnerable to further exploitation through prostitution, often participate when they are heavily under the influence of drugs and / or alcohol. We believe that a contradiction with Statutory Guidance on Consent arises where women’s ability to consent whilst under the influence can be compromised during involvement in Prostitution, yet they are held accountable under Soliciting Laws.

For the above reasons we believe those being exploited through prostitution should not be subject to the law, but should instead be supported to exit the situation as quickly as possible, see below. We do however believe that those who exploit through prostitution should be held to account through the law. Not only would this rebalance the inequality experienced by women, but was also ensure young men have clarity of responsibility and potential criminal sanctions, discouraging exploitative activity and challenging negative stereotypes of all women. Also the main advantage of this shift would be that women who have been coerced and exploited, or who would identify as having chosen to be involved in prostitution, would be able to report violence and abuse and seek support to exit prostitution without stigma or fear of criminal sanctions, which can lead to financial sanctions / criminal records and reduced opportunities in future employment. It is also
hoped this will also impact positively on assessment of women as parents with regard to there no longer being involvement in criminal justice system. This may allow any child protection assessment to consider the risk, if any, to the child, rather than a judgement on the women’s experiences of prostitution.

The UK requires a tailor made approach to prostitution, particularly in light of the changes in Northern and the Republic of Ireland. The potential movement of women and children to areas where men can exploit without fear of conviction or sanction, would require increases in support services and policing, not only to support those exploited through prostitution, but also for communities where this activity takes place.

The Nordic Model is often used as an example of a best practice approach by women’s services. SAY Women would agree to the principal of holding those who exploit women to account, but would welcome discussion on how this would be implemented in the UK context.

Are measures necessary to;
- Assist those involved in prostitution to exit from it
- Increase the extent to which exploiters are held to account
- Discourage demand which drives commercial sexual exploitation?

It is essential that women can access services to increase their safety, reduce the opportunity for further exploitation and can receive support to resolve impacts of experiences of childhood sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women they may have / be experiencing.

SAY Women is a unique service that provides safe, semi supported accommodation. Our practice reflects the Judith Herman model of Trauma and Recovery. This not only is a safe environment that recognises and confronts experiences of sexual exploitation / abuse without stigma, but also supports young women with negative coping mechanisms they have had to adopt to survive their experiences. Survivors of sexual violence / abuse are over-represented in addiction, self-harm and mental health services. SAY Women supports young women with all of these issues, in partnership with other agencies and we would be happy to share our experiences.

SAY Women believe that when the buyers of sex are not adequately held to account through legislation this not only increases their power, as they are absent from sanctions, but also promotes the ideology of women as commodities. Although for the majority of women in our country the selling of sex will not be their experience, it is now widely accepted that the normalisation of the buying and selling of women in
prostitution impacts on the image of all women. As stated by buyers of sex in recent research conducted by Women’s Support Project when asked “What changes would have to take place in order to end prostitution?”

“Men think if they can buy a prostitute and treat her as an object, they can do the same with other women.”

“Most of the men who go, see it as a business transaction and don’t see the girl as a woman. This could impact on how a man sees women in general.”

As with all forms of violence against women, it can be extremely difficult for women to exit prostitution. Whilst experiencing ongoing exploitation through prostitution, women may not fully acknowledge their lack of power, much the same as women experiencing domestic violence who feel they love the men who abuse them. We attempted to balance increasing the power and control of women who are experiencing domestic abuse, whilst recognising the criminal activity of those abusing them. It is vital that we provide the same protection for women involved in prostitution.

“Common sense” beliefs that this approach to legislation would put women more at risk, also reflects the debate around domestic abuse. We no longer expect women to be able to predict or take responsibility for the abusive behaviour of a partner. We recognise that perpetrators use manipulation and grooming to prepare and control the women they abuse. We are in agreement with many police officers we work with that neither can we expect women involved in street prostitution to assess the risk of men picking them up. This is for a number of reasons;

Young women receiving support from SAY Women have often experienced multiple abuse through their lifetime. It can be difficult for them to assess risk due to limited understanding of boundaries, confused messages and little compassion in their childhood.

- Abusers are manipulative.
- As explained above most of the women involved in street prostitution are heavily under the influence of drugs / alcohol and should not be expected to be able to make any such assessment.

Finally we believe the eradication of prostitution from our streets is also a community issue. Research has shown that where commercial sexual exploitation exists, communities experience an increase in sexual violence towards all women and raises women’s fears of assault (Eden, Farley, Royal Town Planning Institute). We believe that a recognition that exploitation through prostitution as violence against women would
encourage increased support services and changes in protective Legislation for women leading to;

- Reduced reluctance on the part of women to request support to exit prostitution, or for protection.
- A reduction in the period of time exploitation occurs, and the likelihood of violent exploitation, as the perpetrator would be aware that it would be in the woman’s interests to report, without fear of being charged herself.
- Availability of information for men on the impact of their involvement in buying sexual services, offering them the opportunity to choose not to become engaged in these activities.
- Increased understanding within the community that men who exploit women through prostitution are exploiting their power, and may be active sexual predators, and therefore a risk in their community, increasing safety activity by families and girls who are at risk of exploitation in the future.

All of this, we believe would have a positive impact on reducing the need for long term services for women, would reduce the opportunity to exploit women and would increase the opportunity to access the support they require to exit prostitution, therefore have a positive financial impact in a time of limited budgets.

CHAR report (1992) 4 in 10; Report on young women who become homeless as a result of sexual abuse.


Hughes, D.M. (2000) Men Create the Demand; Women are the Supply


Alcohol Research UK (2013) Cycles of harm: Problematic alcohol use amongst women involved in prostitution

Farley, M (2009) “Myths and Facts about Trafficking for Legal and Illegal Prostitution “
Royal Town Planning Institute (2007), Gender and Spatial Planning, Good Practice Note 7, 10 December 2007

Dawn Fyfe
Director
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