We are alarmed that the question of criminalising sex workers’ clients is being discussed again.

“The Home Affairs Committee is launching an inquiry into the way prostitution is treated in legislation. In particular, the inquiry assesses whether the balance in the burden of criminality should shift to those who pay for sex rather than those who sell it”.

We have been discussing this issue for many years in our network. We are concerned that this will mean further pushing sex workers underground, increasing their risk of rape or even murder. The vast majority of sex workers are mothers trying to feed their children as best they can in this climate of cuts and austerity. They are our sisters, daughters, wives or partners.

We do not believe that if all clients were criminalised (some already are), the burden of criminality would be “shifted” off sex workers. Sex workers who work together for safety will still be criminalised. Sex workers will be forced to modify how they work to try to avoid detection and protect clients (their source of income) from arrest.

We are also concerned about the men targeted by this proposal. Theresa May has criticised the discriminatory “stop and search” policy -- Black people are up to 17.5 times more likely than white people to be stopped and searched by the police in certain areas of the UK. To give police more power in relation to sex work would result in more men of colour and working class men being targeted and criminalised. Can the Inquiry ask for the racial breakdown of arrests for kerb-crawling and for the offence of “paying for sex with a prostitute forced or coerced”?

A police record for such a “crime” would bar men from jobs in areas like teaching, social services, childcare, etc., despite the fact that no breach of consent was involved.

In proposing to criminalise clients you would go against a rising international movement. Sex work in New Zealand has been decriminalised since 2003. The English Collective of Prostitute whom we support states that decriminalisation “has been shown to improve sex workers’ working conditions, while making it easier for those who want to get out, to do so”.
Amnesty International voted in August last year to support decriminalisation -- not just of sex workers, indoors and outdoors, but also of clients.

At the symposium on decriminalisation in Parliament last November, attended by hundreds of people, sex workers from 10 countries and a panel of academics presented a compelling case for the “burden of criminality” to be removed from everyone consensually involved in prostitution on grounds of safety.

Currently a Bill has been introduced to decriminalise prostitution in the New Hampshire legislature in the US.

Last but not least, criminalising consenting sex between adults diverts attention from the investigation and prosecution of non-consenting sex – that is of rape.

We urge the Select Committee not to propose to criminalise sex workers’ customers. In a climate of increasing poverty, the last thing that politicians should be focussed on is attacking the basic rights of sex workers (women, men and trans) and increase the criminalisation of anyone involved in consenting sex.

*Payday, a network of men working with the Global Women’s Strike*