Written evidence submitted by Reverend Sarah Schofield

Comments in relation to the Inquiry into Sex Work

I have been the Vicar since 2006 of a Black Country parish that has been a 'red light' area for 200 years.

Professionally I am a Church of England Parish Priest additionally I am a Doctoral Researcher in the field of Priestly vocation/career and gender. I am a member of General Synod and a number of other Church and Charity bodies, however, I make this submission in an entirely personal capacity.

In summary this paper makes the following points
1. The anti social and more aggressive aspects of ‘kerb crawling’ should be tackled by more serious penalties.
2. More support for sex workers to report abuse and violence towards themselves and others.
3. Work with local communities to encourage reporting of abuse and violence towards women they believe to be sex workers as they might any other woman being assaulted.
4. Adequately funded resources for women and men with complex and multiple needs to exit sex work and keep them safe if they remain.
5. An obligation on anyone purchasing any service to make a reasonable assessment whether the person providing the service is in slave labour, whether car wash, nail bar or brothel. To no more purchase trafficked services than stolen property.
6. Programs to divert pimps, usually young men in my area, from seeing this as a ‘career’. In a similar way to gang intervention strategies.

Experience
I moved to my current parish in the week of the Ipswich murders of women who were selling sex. Whilst I set up my cosy new home in my front garden women were making the same risky transaction that the women in Ipswich had made. It was not long before I learnt, through the police and then through the women, of deaths of our own local women. In this submission I have struggled with terminology but have settled on ‘working girls’ because it is the only term women selling sex locally have ever used to me in relation to themselves. Individual names have of course been changed. Working girls are no less my Parishioners than our flower arrangers or the people who travel into the area to work in factories and shops.

Amongst the congregation and some other local residents there was a fierce commitment to develop a place of safety and support which took years to come to fruition. In Autumn 2014 we opened the Warm Welcome Night Café assisted by specialist partners and supported by local volunteers and donors. We have got to know over 60 women who are selling sex, and a small number of pimps. With many of these women we have established ongoing and deepening relationships.
The following are my reflections based on the last 10 years, what might make life better for all my parishioners whether participants in the sex trade or not. They are my personal thoughts.

Criminal Sanctions

I have a, thus far, unshakeable dislike of the men who circle our streets at all hours looking for a chance to buy sex.

I would like to see more prosecutions of anti social kerb crawlers. Women who aren’t working girls experience men driving slowly sometimes repeatedly shouting a price and a location in broad daylight. We are approached on foot and even on the school run. Mothers are aware of when would be punters approach not just them but also their school age daughters.

The recent prosecution in Wolverhampton, of a kerb crawler who had repeatedly asked a 14 year old for business whilst she waited for a lift from her dad is something to be encouraged. Kerb crawlers need to know their more extreme anti social behaviour has consequences and residents should report them.

We need more resources to encourage sex workers to report crimes of violence against themselves. Work with local residents to encourage reporting of violence against all people. The advantage of a locally led project is that we have been able to challenge a culture where if a woman is beaten in the street people do not intervene or call the police if she is 'just a working girl'. This means time with residents’ groups to create a culture that humanises all involved.

I understand the urge to criminalise the purchase of sex especially amongst people with faith or feminist convictions. In our particular area the purchasers of sex have not led me to see prostitution as career choice in which women have equal power or dignity to the purchasers or pimps. I trust those who make this claim for themselves but I have yet to meet a woman locally who has expressed her situation as one of free choice and personal fulfilment. As a Christian I believe long term monogamous relationships based on non material richness and mutual self giving to be the best pattern for life. After much thought, despite my human failing to see that of God in some of the men coming in to our parish I don’t think criminalisation of payments would reduce the negative impact on sex workers and residents.

For a woman wishing to leave the trade access to practical support is minimal if not non existent in our city. A hypothetical woman arriving in church with a desire to escape her pimp, her addictions and often mental health struggles will usually have health, housing, and financial needs. There is no single pathway for that woman to follow, in each individual area of support she will be at the end of a very long queue. An immediate crisis intervention to this cry for help is impossible.

The anti social behaviour of some punters already falls well within criminal activity but for convictions to happen a mindshift needs to take place to encourage victims and witnesses to report, and police and courts to investigate, these crimes against women with the same commitment as they would for any other victim.

I would like to commend West Midlands Police call handlers for a change in culture. In my first few years calls from the Vicarage about sex workers at immediate risk of violence were always interpreted as a request to sanction the woman but this is now noticeably changed and police receive the message as it was intended.
The Church of England played a key role in the decriminalisation of homosexual acts between consenting adults, acknowledging the possibility of disagreement without criminal sanction. If a person buying sex, or selling it, is only 'guilty' of this single act of behaviour which I would prefer they had not undertaken I feel that it is better left outside the courts. There are many existing crimes and breaches of civil sanctions frequently associated with sex work which are not proactively investigated or vigorously prosecuted.

In relation to modern slavery there should be an expectation that any purchaser of any service should make efforts to avoid and report transactions involving trafficking. The same level of sanction should apply to the teacher using a carwash, a lawyer getting her nails done and a person buying sex from businesses based on slavery.

In relation to feminism and self esteem the root of a journey into sex work is not a person offering money. I meet many women who feel a crushing lack of self worth and whose horizons of the possible are tragically low. These are seeds sowed in childhood and reinforced across every aspect of our culture.

Finally a word on pimps: those I have met have a complex often heroic self justifying narrative. One had aspired to become a careers advisor, he saw his role as in same way similar to an advisor he had met in a Young Offenders Institute. He introduced two women to our project with complex motives. A woman will stay out longer after cake, condoms and tea in church but he also hoped, for himself and the women he controlled, for a life free from drugs outside the sex trade. Work is needed with young men to sanction and challenge their behaviour. In the matrix of unwilling sex work they require but also deserve consideration in the same way as young men involved in gangs. I lived in south central Manchester for 15 years and I see the same patterns at work leading to damaged individuals and communities.

Then are so many existing options within law and community life that are left unused or simply ignored. The single biggest change we have seen is simply that working girls are now known by name, with children, sisters, hopes, and individual stories. When we found ourselves unexpectedly in the national press local residents, previously uninvolved, arrived at church to support us and with gifts for the women we meet. In a recent celebration of the Warm Welcome, Eve, one of our most regular visitors said she came to the Church as it is 'the only place I am not judged'.

The actual financial transaction in sex work is the least of my concerns. I want to see Eve believing she is of infinite worth, and society returning that respect by sanctioning those who mistreat her, being ready with support when she needs it. I want to see pimps and punters sanctioned for anti social and criminal acts and where appropriate offered behaviour change programmes.

Communities must be educated to recognise and report all victims of violence, controlling behaviour, and trafficking whatever their lifestyle.

My understanding of feminism and my faith leads me to see prostitution as something far less than women deserve but where there is a clear and independent choice to sell or buy sex I do not see the value of state penalties. I am concerned for women who want to leave, and those so poorly treated that even imagining life outside sex work is impossible. There are many options already acknowledged to help, the challenge is to make them available.

Reverend Sarah Schofield
Vicar, All Saints Wolverhampton