

Dear UK Members of Parliament,

We are concerned about attempts to introduce legislation into Parliament that would criminalise paying for sex and close down online sites where sex workers advertise. Touted as solutions to sex trafficking and exploitation, these measures will only exacerbate violence against women, including those who are being exploited.

Legislation that criminalises the purchase of sex is known as ‘the Nordic Model’, or ‘End Demand’. It is widely opposed by sex workers and by organisations such as Amnesty International, the World Health Organisation, and the UK’s national frontline charity for sex worker safety, National Ugly Mugs. In countries where this legal model has been introduced, neither sex workers nor sex worker-led organisations have been consulted. Clear documented harm to the most marginalised women has followed.

Criminalising advertising sexual services online has been [proven](#) to exacerbate harm for sex workers. This is shown by evidence from the United States where similar legislation ([SESTA/FOSTA](#)) was introduced in 2018.

This pandemic is an indication of what happens when sex workers’ incomes are taken away: women are forced into poverty.

The Nordic Model does not help victims of trafficking

Proponents of the Nordic Model claim that criminalising the purchase of sex will help victims of trafficking by reducing prostitution, and by extension trafficking. But trafficking isn’t caused by the demand for sex, but by people’s poverty and lack of options: people are made vulnerable to traffickers for a number of reasons. They may be [trying to migrate](#) and become trapped in abusive situations because people without secure immigration status have few to no rights. They may be trafficked into sexual exploitation through deception, coercion or force, or may choose to enter into sex work knowingly before a situation becomes exploitative later on, and they are unable to leave because, for example, they are threatened. The solution therefore is not to further criminalise sex work, just as other industries where trafficking occurs are not criminalised; but to ensure people have legal ways to migrate, have routes out of poverty, and are empowered to seek support from authorities without the fear of penalty such as detention, deportation or destitution.

Some anti-trafficking initiatives don’t help victims and also cause great harm to sex workers. When police raid brothels in the name of anti-trafficking, it is often [migrant sex workers who are arrested](#). In the UK, when victims of trafficking are ‘rescued’ by police, they can face arrest, detainment as criminals, and forcible deportation – often back to [the same situation](#) in which they were targeted. Sex workers know this and are therefore deterred from reporting ANY violence and exploitation, for fear of deportation.

[Mass raids](#) of workplaces in Soho, in which 250 police officers – many in riot gear, with dog units – raided and closed 18 brothels, resulted in police dragging scantily clad women out onto the street against their will. This was carried out under the guise of stopping trafficking, but failed to refer a single person to the National Referral Mechanism.

Even when people are officially recognised as trafficking victims, material and legal support for them to settle in the UK and escape poverty is absent or inadequate. Women left with no recourse to public funds have increased vulnerability to violence and exploitation.

The Nordic Model increases danger for sex workers

Evidence shows that the Nordic Model does nothing for the very groups it claims to protect. In the Republic of Ireland, violence against sex workers increased dramatically after similar legislation was introduced in 2017 (Northern Ireland implemented the law in 2015). According to [Ugly Mugs Ireland](#), crimes against sex workers almost doubled in the two years following the introduction of the law. A [2020 study](#) commissioned by HIV Ireland found that sex workers who experienced violence at work were increasingly reluctant to report to the police.

National Ugly Mugs worked with the National Police Chiefs Council on [National Policing Sex Work and Prostitution Guidance](#) for police officers encountering sex workers to “engag[e] respectfully and caus[e] minimal harm to sex workers in their role.” However, [National Ugly Mugs also found that:](#)

“Full consent to engage with police down from 28% in 2012 to 9% in 2019 among off-street independent workers. Anonymous consent to share intelligence with police also declined from 95% in 2012 to 75% in 2019. The most common reasons for these include fear of/experience of criminalisation, fear of/experience of stigma, inconsistencies in police responses and a lack of confidence in the ability of police to support sex workers in a discreet and informed way.”

This indicates that the negative treatment of sex workers in the past, coupled with inconsistent approaches by police, continues to impact sex workers’ willingness to engage with authorities and seek support.

In France, the Nordic Model has been in place since 2016. Since then, the already high murder rate of sex workers has dramatically increased. In the six months between June and December 2019, [at least 10 sex workers were killed](#). The victims have overwhelmingly been migrant trans women. A 2018 [Medicins du Monde](#) report found that the law has led to 42% of workers being more exposed to violence, 38% finding it increasingly hard to demand condom use, 70% observing no improvement or a deterioration of their relations with the police, 78% losing income, and 63% experiencing a deterioration of living conditions.

The Nordic Model does not ‘decriminalise’ sex workers

In countries that have brought in the Nordic Model, sex workers have not, as is often promised, been ‘decriminalised’. Brothel-keeping – which is defined as two or more people working together – remains a crime, forcing women to work alone or risk arrest. When police raid workplaces with the stated aim of arresting clients, it is repeatedly sex workers who are charged. This has happened in [Ireland](#), [Norway](#), [Finland](#), and [Sweden](#).

We firmly agree that penalties around outdoor work, usually for soliciting, should be repealed. However, when clients are criminalised, sex workers are forced to evade the police. If you are working outdoors, that might mean having to get into a client’s car too quickly, and not being able to negotiate price, condom use or boundaries. It might mean working in a more isolated area, increasing the risk of violence.

The Nordic Model penalises the most marginalised

Criminalising clients has been [shown to increase violence](#) for the most marginalised workers, the same workers often conflated with trafficked victims. With the fall in clients, sex workers are forced to say yes to dangerous clients and services they would otherwise say no to, just to survive. Sex workers are often living under multiple forms of marginalisation. Over-represented groups include women, single [mothers](#), [migrants](#), [people of colour](#), [disabled people](#), [LGBT people](#), and people who have experienced [poverty and homelessness](#).

While wealthier sex workers may emerge unscathed, it will be marginalised groups who, facing destitution, are [forced](#) to take on [worse, more dangerous](#) work.

Nordic Model advocates lean on the provision of ‘exit services’. But in reality, these exit services don’t exist, or they make their support contingent on anti-sex worker ideology. This includes refusing to offer realistic harm reduction methods, such as condoms. In Ireland, Nordic Model supporters acknowledge that “[there is no evidence that these things are in place in Ireland](#)”. In France, two years after the law was enacted, the committees that were supposed to oversee exit programmes [were still not set up](#).

Criminalising sex workers’ online presence is dangerous

[Evidence](#) shows that internet platforms have made working in the sex industry safer, allowing sex workers to share safety tips, lists of dangerous men, and screen potential clients. Despite claims by sex work prohibitionists that advertising websites only benefit third parties, online platforms allow more sex workers to work independently, taking control over their rates and services. Banning sex workers’ online presence also removes peer support and prevents labour organisation, resulting in an increase in the isolation of sex workers.

When the United States introduced the 2018 FOSTA/SESTA laws, online advertising platforms were shut down. Sex workers abruptly faced financial precarity; many were pushed into unsafe or exploitative working conditions. Many reported that the loss of their online presence made them more susceptible to labour exploitation and trafficking, or forced them to work outdoors. [Research](#) shows that the introduction of SESTA/FOSTA led to an increase in poverty, insecure housing, [suicide, murder](#), isolation, and the deterioration of physical and mental health. Various sex worker-led organisations have [spoken out](#) about the dangers of FOSTA/SESTA.

According to [one researcher](#): “[FOSTA/SESTA] has created an environment where marginalised populations are pushed into increased financial insecurity, which, in turn, makes them more vulnerable to labour exploitation and trafficking in the sex industry.”

We, the undersigned, call on MPs to take into account evidence about the harms caused by ‘Nordic Model’ style laws. We oppose any legislation which increases the criminalisation of prostitution by criminalising the purchase of sex or by closing down the online sites where sex workers advertise.

SIGNATORIES

Amnesty

Freedom United

GMB

Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants

LGBT+ Labour

Liberty

Sisters Uncut

Stonewall

United Voices of the World (UVW)

University and College Union (UCU)

A Way Out

Alliance for Choice

Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF)

Bakers, Food, and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU)

Baroness Natalie Bennett, Green Party

Basis Sex Work

Chardine Taylor-Stone, Black Feminist, Trade unionist and writer

Cleaners and Allied Independent Workers Union (CAIWU)

Daisy Cooper MP, Liberal Democrats

Dr Alison Phipps, University of Sussex

Dr Belinda Brooks Gordon, Birbeck, University of London

Dr Ella Cockbain, University College London

Dr Jane Pitcher, retired lecturer

Dr Julia Laite, Birbeck University of London

Dr Kate Hardy, University of Leeds

Dr Kate Lister, Leeds Trinity University

Dr Laura Connelly, University of Salford

Dr Lynzi Armstrong, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Dr Mary Laing, Northumbria University

Dr Sam Okyere, University of Bristol

Dr Sophie Lewis, author of 'Full Surrogacy Now'

Emily Kenway, author of "The Truth about Modern Slavery"

English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP)

FKA Twigs, singer

Florence Schechter, Director and Founder of the Vagina Museum

Gendered Intelligence

Georgina Horne, Influencer

Global Alliance against Traffic in Women (GAATW)

GRT Socialists

Hannah Witton, Author and Sex and Relationships content creator

HIV Scotland

Inclusive Mosque Initiative

Jamie Stone MP, Liberal Democrat

Jason Domino, Health campaigner

Josie Long

Labour Campaign for Free Movement

LGBT Foundation

LGBTQIA Greens

Nadia Whittome MP, Labour Party

National Ugly Mugs (NUM)

National Union of Students - Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI)

National Union of Students (NUS)

North East Sex Work Forum

Pink Therapy

POW Nottingham

Prof Jane Scoular, University of Strathclyde

Prof Julia O'Connell Davidson, University of Bristol

Prof Mark McCormack, University of Roehampton

Prof Teela Sanders, University of Leicester

Prof Tracey Sagar, University of Swansea

Prof. Maggie O'Neill, University College Cork

Prof. Nicola Mai, University of Newcastle Australia

Release

Roxane Gay, Writer, Podcast Host

Sara Pascoe

Scot-PEP

Sex Worker Advocacy and Resistance Movement (SWARM)

Sex Workers Alliance Ireland

Socialists of Colour

Sofie Hagen, Comedian, Author and Podcaster

Survivors UK

The Josephine Butler Society

Traveller LGBT Pride

Umbrella Lane

Women's Strike Assembly

World Jewish Relief

x:talk

Yorkshire Mesmac

Young Labour

Young Scots for Independence

Zarah Sultana MP, Labour Party

Belfast Feminist Network

Bent Bars Project

Cooperation Town

Daisy Jones, Author, Vice editor

Dan Frost, Editor, New Socialist

Dawn Foster, Jacobin Magazine

Devon Radical Queer Network

Doris Murphy, University College Cork

Dr Alison J Carr, University of Huddersfield

Dr Alison Jobe, Durham University

Dr Angelika Strohmayer, Northumbria University

Dr Elizabeth Faulkner, Keele University

Dr Gemma Ahearne, University of Liverpool

Dr Joel Quirk, University of Warwick

Dr Kate Brown, University of York

Dr Max Morris, Kingston University London

Dr Nadine Gloss, University of Leeds

Dr Nathan Dawthorne, Franz Boas Papers Project, University of Western Ontario

Dr Raven Bowen, independent scholar

Dr Victoria Brooks, University of Westminster

Eamonn McCann, Civil rights activist

East Midlands Sexual Health

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Emma Garland, Vice

Gerry Carroll MLA, People Before Profit

Good Night Out Campaign CIC

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Josie Sparrow, General Editor, New Socialist.

Jude Wanga, Editor, New Socialist

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Lauren O'Neill, journalist

Lesbians and Gays support the Migrants

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Micha Frazer-Carroll, Writer

Mutual Aid Trans Edinburgh

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Northern Police Monitoring Project

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Rachel Stuart, University of Kent

Rachel Woods MLA, Alliance Party

Reclaim the Night Belfast

Regularise

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Rhian E Jones, Red Pepper Co-Editor

Ruby Lott-Lavigna, journalist

Sex and Rage

Sister Supporter

South London Bartenders Group

Spectra

Tess Herrmann, University of York

The Gemini Project

The Love Tank CIC

The Men's Room

The Rainbow Project

Tom Gann, General Editor, New Socialist

Tom Williams, Editor, New Socialist

Travis Alabanza

UK Adult Professionals (UKAP)

Wendy Lyon, Solicitor

WISH

World Jewish Relief

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Zoe Samudzi, writer