

Joint submission to the UN Women consultation on “sex work, the sex trade and prostitution”

This is a joint submission from the following UK-based groups that work for women’s rights and development, and/or to resist the objectification of women and girls, and male violence against women and children. Information about the groups follows the responses to the questions.

1. Nordic Model Now!
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Terminology

We reject the terms “sex work” and “sex worker” because they confuse and obscure the reality.

“Sex work” covers activities from lap dancing and phone line “sex”, to the intimate contact of prostitution. Those who style themselves “sex workers” may not have experienced prostitution as such, but have dabbled in phone or dominatrix work, or be pimps or brothel keepers. Invariably these are the voices that dominate the debates, and even [determine policies](#),ⁱ and not the vulnerable and marginalised women and girls who are the majority in prostitution.

The term “sex work” suggests prostitution is service work, like waitressing. “Service” is [defined](#)ⁱⁱ as “the action of helping or doing work for someone.” Being paid to be penetrated, to endure a stranger ejaculating on you, and other core components of prostitution are not helping or active work. Rather it is being used as an object for someone else’s gratification. This is the brutal reality of prostitution – it is neither work nor service.

Question 1: The 2030 Agenda commits to universality, human rights and leaving nobody behind. How do you interpret these principles in relation to sex work/trade or prostitution?

The Agenda aims to ensure “all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment” and is based on international human rights (HR) treaties:

“10. The new Agenda is guided by the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations, including full respect for international law. It is grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), international human rights treaties...”

The protection of human dignity is a cornerstone of the UDHR and other HR treaties:

- The [1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of Prostitution](#)ⁱⁱⁱ states that “prostitution and the accompanying evil of the traffic in persons for the purpose of prostitution are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person and endanger the welfare of the individual, the family and the community.”

- Article 6 of [CEDAW](#)^{iv} explicitly prohibits the exploitation of prostitution of women:

“States Parties shall take all appropriate measures, including legislation, to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation of prostitution of women.”

- The [Palermo Protocol](#)^v asserts an obligation to address the poverty and inequality that make women and children vulnerable to trafficking **and** to address the demand for prostitution that drives sex trafficking. It also makes clear that the essential feature of sex trafficking is third-party involvement in someone else’s prostitution and that consent is irrelevant when the person is under 18 or when any of the following means have been used:

“threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person, for the purpose of exploitation”

These treaties consider prostitution a violation of the human rights of the individual and of all women to equality with men. Moreover the prohibition of the “exploitation of the prostitution” of another implicitly prohibits pimping, procuring and brothel keeping – key aspects of the sex trade.

Evidence supports the harms of prostitution. For example:

- A [study conducted by UCL](#)^{vi} found that “violence is a prominent feature in the lives of sex workers in almost all sex work settings”; “a single year of engagement in sex work is likely to have the same impact on mental health as an entire life of experiences prior to

involvement in sex work”; and “Social exclusion is the leading cause of entrance into sex work and **exclusion is often deepened** as a result of engaging in sex work.”

- A [UN multi-country study](#)^{vii} found that men perpetrating rape of non-partners and/or violence against intimate partners are associated with prostitution buying. Studies of [prostitution buyers](#)^{viii} have found they are more likely to commit rape and other aggressive sexual acts. In addition, the contempt they have for women is born out by [survivor testimony](#)^{ix} and [research on punter forums](#).^x

Prostitution involves a series of male strangers penetrating the woman’s vagina and anus, often with violent and prolonged thrusting. This can lead to infection with HIV and other STIs and injuries to the reproductive and other internal organs, which can cause sterility, problems in pregnancy, and long-term ill-health.

Since **prostitution itself** causes harm, positioning “voluntary” prostitution as fundamentally different from forced prostitution is misguided. Any policy that legitimises or normalises prostitution inevitably leads to its increase, and therefore causes more women and girls to be “left behind,” more male violence against women and girls (MVAWG), and deeper gender inequality.

The treaties underpinning the 2030 Agenda place **binding obligations** on UN Women, as a UN agency, to oppose any trivialisation of prostitution and to work towards its elimination. To comply with these obligations, UN Women therefore has a duty to:

- a. Avoid using the terms “sex work” and “sex worker” because they trivialise and normalise abuse.
- b. Oppose decriminalising pimping, procuring, and brothel keeping.
- c. Oppose criminalising prostituted persons.
- d. Support criminalising prostitution buyers.

Question 2: The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set out to achieve gender equality and to empower all women and girls. The SDGs also include several targets pertinent to women’s empowerment, such as a) reproductive rights b) women’s ownership of land and assets c) building peaceful and inclusive societies d) ending the trafficking of women e) eliminating violence against women. How do you suggest that policies on sex work/trade/ prostitution can promote such targets and objectives?

Prostitution, whether forced or “voluntary,” is harmful to the individual, contributes to MVAWG generally, and tends to entrench individual women’s disadvantage and all women’s inequality. Any policy that legitimises prostitution leads to its increase and works against the SDGs.

SDG 8 calls for **decent work** for women (8.5) and safe and secure working environments for all with particular attention to women migrants (8.8). Page 33 of the UN Secretary General's [Leave No one Behind](#)^{xi} report defines **decent work** as follows:

“productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity. Decent work involves opportunities for productive work, delivers a fair income, guarantees equal opportunities and equal treatment for all, provides security in the workplace and protection for workers and their families, offers better prospects for personal development and social inclusion...”

Prostitution, whether forced or “voluntary,” cannot fit this definition of decent work.

Sex trafficking is driven by the vast profits that can be made because ordinary men pay to buy women and girls for sex, and legislation against it is often ineffective. Even under [legalised regimes](#),^{xii} ruthless organised criminal gangs control large swathes of the sex industry. This is also true [in the UK](#)^{xiii} where enforcement of laws against pimping and brothel keeping is lax.

We support the conclusions of the European Parliament study on [Prostitution and its Impact on Gender Equality](#)^{xiv} that laws against sex buying that rely on consent are ineffective; the notion of vulnerability should be treated in a wide sense when assessing whether victims meet the definition of trafficking; and the definition of vulnerability should include poverty and deprivation.

We therefore believe that UN Women policies must conform to the points set out in response to Question 1 and call for:

- i. Legislation against trafficking that conforms to the Palermo Protocol.
- ii. Pimping, procuring, and brothel keeping to be criminalised and effectively policed, with penalties that reflect the harm they cause.
- iii. Prostituted persons to be decriminalised and provided with well-funded holistic services to help them exit.
- iv. Measures to address women's poverty and inequality, including equal education and decent, safe, healthy and productive employment.
- v. Prostitution buyers to be criminalised and effectively policed to reduce the demand that leads to sex trafficking.
- vi. Public education about the harms of prostitution.

Question 3: The sex trade is gendered. How best can we protect women in the trade from harm, violence, stigma and discrimination?

We reject UNAIDS' advice that decriminalising the entire sex trade is the best way to ensure prostituted persons have access to healthcare and support:

- We note that Alejandra Gil, Vice President of the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) has been [jailed for 15 years for sex trafficking](#)^{xv} and that the NSWP under her leadership was appointed co-chair of UNAIDS and advised on its policy. We believe that this alone justifies UNAIDS revisiting its policy.
- Evidence from [New Zealand](#)^{xvi} and [Germany](#)^{xvii} suggests that **in practice** full decriminalisation of the sex trade **reduces** the negotiating position of the woman and therefore makes the use of condoms less, not more, likely.
- Decriminalising the entire sex trade legitimises prostitution and therefore [increases](#)^{xviii} the amount that takes place and the number of women and girls being drawn into and harmed by it.

Prostituted persons should be decriminalised and afforded full access to healthcare, justice, support and condoms. While condoms reduce the risk of transmission of infections, they do not stop the other physical and mental health risks associated with prostitution.

Prostitution can never be safe (regardless where it takes place) or meet the definition of “decent work.” Therefore efforts must be focused on reducing prostitution; providing services to help those in it to build a life outside; addressing women and children’s poverty; and ensuring that education and decent employment is available to women.

Research in [Norway](#)^{xix} and [Sweden](#)^{xx} shows that the [Nordic Model](#)^{xxi} has reduced human trafficking and the amount of prostitution, with a [decrease in violence](#)^{xxii} against the women. It has therefore reduced the harm overall.

The stigma associated with prostitution is intrinsic to its nature – so the best way to eradicate stigma is to eradicate the practice itself.

About the groups making this submission



Nordic Model Now!

A grass-roots group campaigning for the abolition of prostitution and the adoption of the Nordic Model approach to prostitution in the UK. The group is made up of women from a variety of backgrounds and includes survivors of prostitution and child sexual exploitation, academics, journalists and teachers.

<http://nordicmodelnow.org/> | [@nordicmodelnow](https://twitter.com/nordicmodelnow) | [/nordicmodelnow](https://www.nordicmodelnow.org/)



White Ribbon Campaign (UK)

Men challenging and speaking out about male violence against women and girls.

www.whiteribboncampaign.co.uk | [@menantiviolence](https://twitter.com/menantiviolence)



London Feminist Network

A women only group that works with other groups to increase women's resistance to male violence against women in all its forms including pornography and prostitution. We also organise our own campaigns such the London Reclaim The Night march against rape and male violence.

<http://londonfeministnetwork.org.uk/> | [@LDNfeminist](https://twitter.com/LDNfeminist)



NOT BUYING IT!

A UK-based group that challenges the objectification of women in the media and general culture.

www.notbuyingit.org.uk | [@not_buyingit](https://twitter.com/not_buyingit)



Rooms of Our Own

Rooms of our Own seeks to provide safe, affordable and accessible space for women's organisations.

roomso4own.wordpress.com | [@roomso4own](https://twitter.com/roomso4own)



Scary Little Girls

Scary Little Girls is an artist-lead theatre company that promotes the artistic work of women in all aspects of theatrical story-telling.

<http://www.scarylittlegirls.co.uk> | [@ScaryLittleGs](https://twitter.com/ScaryLittleGs)



A CALL TO MEN UK

A CALL TO MEN UK seeks to actively engage boys and men in ending male violence against women and girls and creating a more respectful, safer society for all in the process.

<http://acalltomenuk.org.uk/> | [@ACallToMenUK](https://twitter.com/ACallToMenUK)



Object

Working for better representation of women and girls in the media, and against sex object culture.

<http://objectupdate.tumblr.com/> | [@ObjectUpdate](https://twitter.com/ObjectUpdate)



Campaign against Sex Robots

A non-profit group against the development of robotic technologies shaped by inequalities and objectification of women & children.

<http://campaignagainstsexrobots.org/> | [@RobotCampaign](https://twitter.com/RobotCampaign)



Chelt Fems

Chelt Fems is a feminist campaign group. We exist to challenge the gender-based discrimination experienced by women and girls and are proud to support the Nordic Model.

<http://www.cheltfems.org.uk/> | [@chelt_fems](https://twitter.com/chelt_fems)



Zero Option Sheffield

Campaigning to make Sheffield strip club free.

<http://zerooptionblog.wordpress.com/> | [@ZeroOption4Shef](https://twitter.com/ZeroOption4Shef)



JURIES

A campaign to introduce mandatory juror briefings on rape myths and realities in all rape, sexual assault and childhood sexual abuse trials.

<http://juriesunderstandingsv.wordpress.com/> | [@UnderstandingSV](https://twitter.com/UnderstandingSV)



End Online Misogyny

A campaign to highlight the widespread and violent nature of online violence against women and girls.

<http://www.endmisogyny.org/> | [@misogyny_online](https://twitter.com/misogyny_online)



Yes Matters

Campaign and workshops to tackle lack of knowledge around consent, the effects of sexual objectification and the damage of gender stereotypes.

<http://www.yes-matters.co.uk/> | [@YesMattersUK](https://twitter.com/YesMattersUK)

References

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