

Nordic Model Now! submission to UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty & human rights in the UK

About us

Nordic Model Now! is a grassroots women's group campaigning for the abolition of prostitution and effective implementation of the Nordic Model (also known as the Sex Buyer Law). The group includes survivors of prostitution. See <http://nordicmodelnow.org/> for more information.

Summary

We start with an overview that briefly summarises how Government policies since 2010 have impacted women's economic position and how, along with concomitant cultural and policy changes, this has resulted in women turning to prostitution in increasing numbers, often as a last resort from destitution. We follow this with three case studies that illustrate how this plays out in practice. Identifying details have been obscured so we are happy for this to be published.

Overview

There is overwhelming [evidence](#)¹ that policies implemented by the UK Government since May 2010 have had a profoundly negative impact on society, with [women](#)² in general hardest hit, and lone mothers, and Black, Asian, and disabled women hit the worst of all. This is a violation of Article 2 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women ([CEDAW](#)).³

It is increasingly difficult for women, particularly [mothers](#),⁴ to survive independently. Women are once again being driven into economic dependence on male partners. This gives the male partner disproportionate power within the relationship, and makes it more likely he will be abusive and violent. Welfare changes and [defunding](#)⁵ of services for abused women make it hard, if not impossible, for women to leave a violent partner. This is a violation of Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights ([UDHR](#))⁶ and of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child ([UNCRC](#)).⁷

This has happened alongside an increase in the availability of pornography – [most](#)⁸ of which features brutal misogynistic violence – and the pornification of the wider culture. This legitimises and normalises the sex trade and male violence against women and girls generally. It grooms girls to think what's important is how they look, pleasing men and attracting male attention, and grooms boys to become “users, takers, and pornography makers.”

It should not be a surprise therefore that many women and girls are turning to prostitution, often in ignorance of the likely long-term consequences and out of financial desperation. For

example, in [Sheffield](#)⁹ a 400% increase was noted in women entering or returning to street prostitution under the duress of extreme poverty.

Few women leave prostitution in better shape – financial or otherwise – than they entered it. [Research](#)¹⁰ has found that violence is a prominent feature of prostitution in all settings and that it tends to entrench women’s disadvantage and social exclusion, and shore up the inequality between the sexes.

The 1949 UN [Convention](#)¹¹ on the Suppression of the Trafficking in Persons recognises prostitution as incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person. While the UK has not ratified this convention, its adoption by the General Assembly means the UN recognises prostitution as a human rights violation. So prostitution should never be considered an acceptable solution to women’s poverty.

Prior to May 2010, the Labour Government was taking seriously its obligations under Article 9 of the [Palermo Trafficking Protocol](#)¹² to address the poverty and inequality that make women and girls vulnerable to entry into prostitution and being trafficked, and to [discourage the demand](#)¹³ from men for prostitution that drives trafficking.

Since then the Government has abandoned these obligations. Not only have women’s poverty and inequality deteriorated rapidly, but [National Policing Sex Work Guidance](#)¹⁴ now advises police forces **against** using the law to target sex buyers and brothel-keepers (unless neighbours complain). The guidance also claims – without evidence – that “experience suggests that enforcement does not resolve the issue, but rather displaces it, making sex workers more vulnerable.”

Policing of the sex trade is now mainly focused on “organised crime” and the plight of British women who have turned to prostitution out of naivety, financial desperation, or coercion from “boyfriends,” is largely ignored. This suggests the Government understands that prostitution is serving as a last line of defence against destitution for women, and that it wishes to institutionalise that.

In this climate of rapidly worsening poverty and inequality between the sexes within a pornified culture that glorifies consumerism and consumption, and police tolerance of prostitution, men are turning to pimping and sex trafficking as a way of making easy money.

All of this is a catastrophe for women and children and for the possibility of equality.

The Government’s austerity policies that have disproportionately impacted women, and their laissez faire approach to prostitution are in clear violation of binding obligations under the Palermo Trafficking Protocol, CEDAW, the UNDHR, UNCRC, and the [Lanzarote Convention](#).¹⁵

Case Study 1

H is in her late 20s, has a history of childhood abuse, and is estranged from her family. She has complex mental health difficulties due to childhood abuse. In 2016, she was the victim of a serious sexual assault in her own home. She reported it to the police and her Community

Mental Health Team (CMHT). While both services were emotionally supportive, they were unable to provide any material help. There were no beds available in local rape crisis shelters due to closure or reduction in services as a result of budget cuts.

The council tried to find her emergency accommodation. She met the Priority Need categories (mental health disability, victim of domestic violence, female, no relatives with whom to stay) to qualify for this. Even so, it took over six weeks to find her emergency accommodation.

While waiting, H paid for a youth hostel from her own savings. This quickly used up all of her savings.

When H was finally placed in temporary accommodation, she could begin the process of applying for Universal Credit (UC). UC can only be applied for online. H left her phone and laptop behind when she escaped her violent home and the police had advised her not to return for them due to the risk. Applying for UC meant trips to the library or the Jobcentre, which was a bus ride away – £3.60 more than she could afford everyday.

H: “I’m an English speaker, had a good education and I’m pretty good with computers. I even have a degree. But applying for UC was such a long, complex process that I nearly gave up. I cried in the library when confronted with yet another complicated and hard to understand page of the online form. I can’t even imagine how you’d do this in a second language or if you had a learning difficulty!

“Once, when I had to go back to the Jobcentre to correct a mistake in the form, I got so overwhelmed I had a panic attack outside, and sat in the street and self-harmed. I had to go to A&E. I was scared to even open the form again for a week (delaying payments further) because I was afraid of it setting off another panic attack and then killing myself. It wasn’t just the form. It was the PTSD I was suffering due to the assault. But the online form and its complexity made everything harder, and reminded me why I was homeless, and I wanted to escape it all.”

This shows the complexity of applying for UC makes the process prohibitive, not only for traumatised individuals or people with mental health difficulties, but also for those with learning difficulties, limited English or computer literacy, or with small children in tow.

When H finally started receiving UC payments (over 12 weeks after becoming homeless), she received the following notification:



If your rent is more than £357.13, you'll need to pay the difference to your landlord.

The temporary accommodation (a small bedsit in a building with 40 other families) cost over £700. This was twice the UC accommodation allowance, which was capped at a little over £350 due to Shared Accommodation Rate (SAR). SAR caps your benefit payment if you are under 35 years old and live in private rented accommodation. With the diminishing stocks of social housing – and more temporary and emergency accommodation being private – even

when women like H manage to access UC, they are not afforded enough to keep a safe roof over their heads while they recover from the trauma of domestic violence.

H accrued several months of rent arrears and was given an eviction date due to her failure to clear the arrears. Terrified of ending up on the streets, she turned to prostitution to pay off her arrears so she could keep a safe roof over her head.

H: "People think prostitution is about having consensual sex for money. It's not. Those men don't want to pay for that. They paid me and then used me however they wanted. I was beaten with objects until I bled; spat at; anally raped; gang raped; passed around at sex parties like a toy, men slipping off their condoms; I was shouted at, threatened, choked, told to look like I enjoyed it or he'd take the money back. I was scared every single second. But the only thing that scared me more was being street homeless, so I saw no choice other than to put up with it until I could clear my rent arrears."

H lives with the physical and mental health consequences of this to this day.

Case Study 2

This case study illustrates how the defunding of services for women in prostitution and the broken welfare system, along with the Government's tolerance for the prostitution system, all serve to trap women in prostitution.

M grew up in poverty and was sexually abused as a child. These experiences were relevant to her entry into prostitution as an 18-year old.

When she got in touch with us, she'd exited prostitution after more than five years of indoor prostitution. She'd developed a drug habit as a way of coping with her disgust and revulsion at men she did not find attractive groping her and using her sexually. She had also developed severe anxiety and PTSD as a result of her experiences in prostitution and had frequent panic attacks.

She'd been desperate to leave prostitution long before she actually managed it and had been plagued by suicidal thoughts, thinking that suicide was her only way out. She contacted several service organisations for support exiting, but they were unable to provide any substantive help. Eventually she managed to exit by moving in with her boyfriend.

Benefit rules meant she was not able to claim benefits in her own right because she was deemed to be in a couple with him. She applied for a variety of jobs without success. She had no work experience, and how could she explain what she'd been doing since she had left school?

After some months the relationship started to fall apart but she found a room in a shared rented house through friends. Now single, she applied for Job Seekers allowance. It came through relatively quickly and all was well for a while.

Then the Jobcentre sent her an appointment but she didn't receive it due to an administrative error. She didn't attend the appointment because she was unaware of it, not having received the message.

The first she knew something was wrong was when she didn't receive her next regular payment. When she contacted the Jobcentre to find out what had happened, they berated her for not attending the appointment. She became confused and distressed, which led to them berating her further and sanctioning her by withholding benefits for a period of three months.

This was the beginning of a period of great difficulty in which she slipped back into acute anxiety and frequent panic attacks. As a result she was unable to meet all the requirements for receiving the benefit and she was sanctioned again. With the prospect of no income for more than six months, she could see no choice other than to return to prostitution.

Case Study 3

The following is a first-hand account of a young single mum turning to prostitution because she was unable to support herself and her baby on the money she earned from her part-time job. It illustrates how poverty and sexual violence work together to trap young women in appalling situations that entrench their disadvantage ever further. It also shows how while prostitution damaged her, it built up the egos and entitlement of her punters – thus serving to entrench the inequality between the sexes.

“Throughout my teenage years I was abused and raped by different men and boys. I got to the point where sex was just something I lay there and did. I realised at 18 I'd never had an orgasm from sex and thought maybe there was something wrong with me. Sex was meaningless to me. It was sensationless.

When I was 18, I escaped the abuse. Even though I was working part time, I couldn't afford my rent, the bills – and I also had a baby from one of the abusers who I needed to be able to clothe and feed.

The part time job gave me around £900 a month which was nowhere near enough considering the rent was £550.

I decided to 'do sex work'. I didn't really know much about it but it made sense. I could have sex with men like I used to, but this time I'd get paid for it. It seemed a win win.

I cannot express the dark empty echoing feeling of having sex with men who have paid to use your body and go back to their wives and girlfriends. The sex was sensationless. No orgasms. No fun. No pleasure. Just sex with some guy I didn't know, who wanted to do stuff to me. The men did what they wanted to me, or I did what they wanted me to do to them, and they chucked me the money and left to get on with their lives.

One time, after having sex with a bank manager and him flicking £100 at me, he walked out of the room and I curled up in a ball and sobbed for hours. I was empty. Sex was nothing. Nothing felt like anything. I drank myself into oblivion. I was 18 years old and I was still masking all of this with a respectable part time job in accounts. I was

trying to recover from all of the abuse but also had completely disconnected myself from what sex was. I thought I was only worth sex. I'd never known any different.

I stopped doing it at 19. The memories still haunt me. The feeling of emptiness and hollowness of my body and my mind will stick with me forever. I have no idea how women cope with prostitution for years. Explains clearly to me why so many of them drink or take drugs. It took me YEARS to be able to have normal consensual sex with someone I loved and for it to feel like something.”

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<http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=4slQ6QSmIBEDzFEovLCuW3XRinAE8KCBFoqOHNz%2FvuCC%2BTxEKAI18bzE0UtfQhJkxxOSGuoMUxHGypYLjNFkwxnMR6GmqogLJF8BzscMe9zpGfTXBkZ4pEaigi44xqiL>

² <http://wbg.org.uk/analysis/assessments/>

³ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/CEDAW.aspx>

⁴ <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/feb/18/welfare-reform-bill-domestic-violence-mothers>

⁵ <http://www.womensaid.org.uk/what-we-do/campaigning-and-influencing/campaign-with-us/sos/>

⁶ <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>

⁷ <http://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>

⁸ <http://vaw.sagepub.com/content/16/10/1065.abstract>

⁹ <http://www.thestar.co.uk/news/sheffield-women-being-forced-into-prostitution-by-benefit-cuts-1-8213743>

¹⁰

http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/303927/A_Review_of_the_Literature_on_sex_workers_and_social_exclusion.pdf

¹¹ <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/TrafficInPersons.aspx>

¹² <http://www.ohchr.org/en/professionalinterest/pages/protocoltraffickinginpersons.aspx>

¹³ <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/hocirc/ho-circ-2010-006-prostitution.doc>

¹⁴ <http://library.college.police.uk/docs/NPCC/National-Policing-Sex-Work-Guidance%20-%202015.doc>

¹⁵ <http://www.coe.int/en/web/children/lanzarote-convention>