

# INVISIBLE

## Prostitution and the lives of women



A report listening to the voices of women  
whose lives are affected by prostitution

Based on research commissioned by women@thewell 2019-20

*By Dr Pat Jones*

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women@thewell

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We are grateful to Rachel Moran and Gill publishers for permission to use quotations from Rachel's book, *Paid For: My journey through prostitution* (Dublin:2013).

Images from the work of artist Claudia Clare's 'And the Door Opened' Project, undertaken in partnership with women@thewell

# women@thewell

**women@thewell** is a front line provider of support and exiting services for women whose lives are affected by prostitution. Based in London, we work with women involved in on street and off street prostitution, including women who have been trafficked into the sex trade. We have over 12 years of service delivery experience.

Our services are used by around 300 women each year who are, have been or are at risk of being exploited in the sex trade. Most of the women have multiple and complex needs including problematic drug and alcohol abuse and/or mental health difficulties, or they may be rough sleeping or insecurely housed, or have been victims of trafficking and modern slavery. We aim to offer trauma-responsive services in a creative and supportive environment. We work across all our services to enable women to develop sustainable exit strategies from involvement in prostitution and the cycles of abuse that are associated with the sex trade. We also provide specialist training and consultancy to other agencies to assist them to improve and develop their practice in this area.

Alongside services, we are committed to advocacy, and work at local, national and international levels to inform, educate and lobby for change. We are the UK member of the International Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution (CAP).<sup>1</sup> We are also a founding member of the European Women's Lobby's Brussels Call, 'Together for a Europe free from prostitution' which brings together 200 women's rights NGOs from 25 states and four other countries.<sup>2</sup> We were also part of the founding group that set up Stand Against Sexual Exploitation (SASE), a charity working to eradicate commercial sexual exploitation.<sup>3</sup> We work with survivor-led activist groups, including SPACE International, one of whose founding members, Rachel Moran, a survivor, is an ambassador for our work.<sup>4</sup>

**women@the well** was founded by Sister Lynda Dearlove, a member of the Institute of Our Lady of Mercy, a Catholic congregation of religious sisters, and the charity is still strongly supported by the Institute. Our work is based on the values of the Christian Gospel and Catholic social teaching. Our staff and volunteers bring diverse faith-based and ethical commitments to our shared mission. Our connections with the institutional Church open up other routes for advocacy by engaging Christian leaders and faith communities.

Based on our experience and our values and ethical commitments, women@thewell takes an abolitionist stance regarding prostitution. We argue for adopting and implementing of an abolitionist or Nordic Model of legal strategy, focusing on reducing the demand by criminalising those who buy sexual access to another person's body. In the Nordic model, pimping is also criminalised, as are brothel keeping, procuring and trafficking; and prostituted persons are not subjected to criminalisation. Just as importantly, an abolitionist model requires that support and services are provided to enable and assist women to exit from prostitution. We believe that this is the strategy that comes closest to protecting prostituted girls and women from harm, violence, stigma and discrimination.

## women@thewell

54-55 Birkenhead Street London WC1H 8BB  
Charity No 1118613 Company No 05664659

<sup>1</sup> The Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution (CAP International) is an advocacy vehicle for frontline NGOs and a global convener for change. The 23 members of CAP International provide direct assistance to victims of prostitution and sexual exploitation in Europe, North America, Latin America, Asia, the Middle-East and Africa. Its members work with, or are founded by, survivors of prostitution.

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.womenlobby.org/-the-brussels-call-together-for-a-?lang=en>

<sup>3</sup> [www.sase.org.uk](http://www.sase.org.uk)

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.spaceintl.org/about/>

## FOREWORD BY CAROLINE HATTERSLEY

Director, women@thewell

There is much to despair about in our world today. Women are still disproportionately affected by violence and poverty almost everywhere. But there is also hope. Across the world women and men are working to challenge and change this reality. At women@thewell we work to tackle part of the problem. We support women who have been entrapped in the sex trade to exit from a life involved in prostitution. True exit is more than simply ceasing to be involved. It is a lifelong journey to overcome trauma and the impact of the label of prostitution. We support around 300 women from across London in each year. Most of the women we support were victims of childhood sexual exploitation; many grew up in the so called 'care system', and most would describe their earliest experiences in prostitution as happening to them before they turned 16. Coerced, controlled and manipulated into prostitution, the concept of 'choice' could not be further from the truth of their experiences

As an agency founded almost 14 years ago by a religious sister, Lynda Dearlove RSM, and supported by her Congregation we were interested to see that the world of prostitution and sexual violence has been largely overlooked by the Catholic Church in both its thought and teaching. The Church has much to say on the dignity of work, on family life and on the issues relating to trafficking and Modern Slavery and on broader concepts of freedom. But to date, very little exploration of prostitution and the sex trade, and the context in which these operate, has been done in official Catholic teaching or in the wider field of Catholic social thought. This paper is a contribution from practice, taking the issue of freedom as it relates to women whose lives are affected by prostitution as a starting point for development.

It is because of this that we approached a funder with a proposition to begin to help the Church to shape its thinking in this area. With the funding in place we were fortunate to secure the services of Dr Pat Jones to undertake the research that led to this and other resources. Bringing expertise in services to vulnerable people, extensive experience working within Catholic structures and the theological background required, she has worked with creativity and passion to shape this work. We have been grateful for the partnership and expertise of the Centre for Catholic Studies at Durham University, the additional support of the Centre for Catholic Social Thought and Practice and the expertise of Dr Anna Rowlands in advising on the evolution of this work.

Any project like this must have the voices of women at its heart. We were mindful of issues of anonymity, the challenges of re-traumatisation and the research fatigue often experienced by survivors in this field. We are therefore in huge awe of the courage of those women and professional staff that came forward to speak about their experiences. Their voices are embedded throughout this document. We hope that the reader will hear them, that the Church will truly see them, as Jesus saw the Samaritan woman, and will take note of the messages within this paper - that they will no longer be invisible.

## THE AUTHOR

Pat Jones recently completed a PhD studying the relationship between Catholic charities working in the field of homelessness and the social teaching of the Catholic Church. More details about her research can be found on the website of Caritas Social Action Network (CSAN) <https://www.csan.org.uk/policy/catholicity-research-2019/> Previously she worked as chief operations officer for Depaul International, Director of the Prisoners Education Trust and Deputy Director of CAFOD.



# PART ONE:

## A chance to have a voice

### 1 Introduction

We're so invisible if we don't talk about it.  
*Young woman still involved in prostitution.*

I guess I'd get people to see that we're not weak, we're not, like, down and out, we can have a lot of strength, and if you give us a bit of a chance to have a voice and to have a bit more choice, we can be there. And that we're not out of society, that we're part of society and we're right next to you.  
*A young woman working towards exit.*

I wish people were a bit more educated about it, and why we do what we do.  
*A young woman still involved*

The voices of women whose lives are affected by prostitution do not easily get heard. Prostitution is mostly a hidden reality. For many women involved in the sex trade, their need to survive means that anonymity is safer. They are also silenced by the social stigma associated with prostitution. One woman who took part in the research commented 'people say, we're corrupt, immoral, we're stained, all that sort of stuff'. For those who manage to exit prostitution, many are still dealing with the aftermath throughout their lives, and this takes all their energy and capacity. A few women find purpose and energy in activism and campaigning, bringing a courageous personal testimony to public and political debate about prostitution and related concerns. But there is more to say, more voices to be heard. All the women whose lives are affected have voices. Each of them matters.

This report is a contribution to the important task of listening to the voices of women who have experienced prostitution. It is based on empirical research undertaken in three different cities in the UK and is particular to this social and legal context. Fourteen women took part in interviews, nine women who were or had been involved in prostitution and five professional staff who worked in specialist voluntary agencies that provide services to women affected by prostitution. The project had a different focus from much other research on this subject. It explores how the women who took part think about their lives and particularly their experience and understanding of freedom. There are other excellent research reports which focus on practical matters such as the barriers to exit from prostitution and the impact of criminal records legislation.<sup>5</sup> This report is interested in how women affected by prostitution describe and interpret their lives and how they make meaning from their experience.

I asked the women who participated what they would like wider society to understand about their reality. In response, they spoke about a desire to be understood, and to be seen in the fullness of who they are as persons. In this report, we listen to the actuality and complexity of their lives. It is only a snapshot, of a limited number of lives; but each woman's particular experience and voice matters.

5 Heather Harvey, Laura Brown, Lisa Young, "I'm No Criminal": Examining the Impact of prostitution-specific criminal records on women seeking to exit prostitution. (London: nia, 2017) <http://www.niaendingviolence.org.uk/perch/resources/im-no-criminal-final-report.pdf>  
 Julie Bindel, and others, *Breaking down the barriers: A study of how women exit prostitution*. (London: Eaves/London South Bank University) <http://i2.cmsfiles.com/eaves/2012/11/Breaking-down-the-barriers-a37d80.pdf>

The report also includes some extracts from Rachel Moran's memoir of her experience of prostitution, *Paid For*.<sup>6</sup> Rachel is an ambassador for women@thewell and founder of SPACE International, a survivor-led movement advocating for the abolition of prostitution.<sup>7</sup> Her memoir is an invaluable text for anyone seeking a deeper understanding of what happens to girls and women in prostitution.

The purpose of the report is to invite greater understanding, leading to practical solidarity with the women who carry the harm of prostitution and those who work with them. With women@thewell, I understand practical solidarity as an active commitment to work for change in several ways. One obvious way is to support the charities that provide services in this field, and who always need funds and volunteers as well as gifts in kind. But there are other ways in which all of us can act to change the context.

- We can invite conversations in which we challenge social attitudes that stigmatise women involved in prostitution.
- We can resist all the ways in which women's bodies are treated as objects or commodities.
- We can educate young people better on issues of sexual consent.
- We can argue for public policy on prostitution that respects the dignity and equality of all women and provides adequate support to the women most affected by prostitution so that they can free themselves from its violence.

### A feminist standpoint

This report, and the research on which is based, assume a feminist standpoint.<sup>8</sup> This means recognising that our social institutions have embedded inequalities between men and women which work to disadvantage women. Gender is not the only factor which affects how power is organised in society; ethnicity, class, economic circumstances and other structures also affect women's lives. But gender has a specific relevance in relation to prostitution, since the majority of those who are sold into the sex trade are women and the majority of those who buy sex are men. Prostitution would barely exist if male buyers did not seek and sustain the market in which women's bodies are bought and sold.<sup>9</sup>

This standpoint also has implications for how the research was carried out. A feminist commitment requires that the researcher is aware of her own bias and reflective about how she listens and interprets. So in contrast to the apparently objective mode in which research is often presented, in this text I disclose myself by writing in a personal voice when it seems appropriate. This also helps a further purpose of the report; to invite a conversation in which we all discover and understand ourselves and our society more fully through listening to the women who speak in this text. So when the commentary in the report says 'we' in a general sense, I intend it to include everyone; women whose lives are affected; women who work in services that support other women; anyone who cares about what happens to women in our society.

<sup>6</sup> (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.spaceintl.org/about/>

<sup>8</sup> Feminism has many meanings and contains lively disagreements, including the opposing views on prostitution described later in this section. It is a collection of movements and ideologies, although common ground exists in the imperative to argue for and achieve social, political and economic equality between women and men, a task that is still unfinished. New cultural, social and political movements such as #metoo are continually emerging, involving both women and men.

<sup>9</sup> Studies report that globally 90% of those who are prostituted are women; 3% are men; 7% are transgender. See sources cited in Enrique Javier Diez Gutierrez, 'Prostitution and Gender-based Violence', *Social and Behavioural Sciences*, 161 (2014) 96–101 p.97. A European study reports that 87% are women, 7% are men and 6% are transgender. TAMPEP Network, *Sex Work in Europe: A mapping of the prostitution scene in 25 European countries*, <https://web.archive.org/web/20150714160224/http://tampep.eu/documents/TAMPEP%202009%20European%20Mapping%20Report.pdf> p.15

As I listened to the women who took part in research interviews, I was constantly aware of two themes that echoed throughout the experiences they described. The first is that we are indeed all connected; we are relational beings, interdependent within our societies and cultures. I could not separate off my experience as a woman from the experience of the women who speak in this research even though our lives are different. The forces that have borne down on their lives exist in all our lives and in the society we create, although they affect each of us to varying degrees. The second is that prostitution is never just about the act itself or the person who is exploited within it. It happens because social structures, policy and law do not adequately protect girls and women from sexual exploitation and do not adequately support them when they try to escape. Prostitution reveals dysfunctionality and forms of violence embedded in our culture and failures in our legal and social welfare systems. That should matter to all of us.

There is a further aspect of my own bias to disclose. I undertook this research with an abolitionist sympathy, which became a commitment as the research progressed. I mean by this that my conviction grew that we should aim to construct a society in which prostitution no longer happens to anyone. I also became increasingly convinced that this is an issue on which all of us should take a stand. To do that, we need to understand the experience of women who are affected and to explore the issues at stake and the remedies proposed. This report aims to serve that understanding.

### An invitation

The voices in this report invite a conversation.

**How do you feel when you listen to the voices?**

**What do we have in common with each other?**

**What do we learn from each other?**

**How can we respond in solidarity?**

## 2 The lives of women affected by prostitution

Each woman who finds herself in prostitution has her own story, but we also need a broader analysis of the situation in which prostitution happens. There are a number of research reports produced by UK universities, charities and the government which provide invaluable analysis that is specific to the UK situation. Some examples of reports and their headlines are:

- *Breaking down the barriers* reported that 72% of their sample of 114 women involved in prostitution had experienced some form of childhood violence; 50% had experienced coercion defined as ‘controlling behaviour to deprive women of rights and resources essential to freedom in everyday life’. 83% had current or former drug or alcohol problems. 30% became involved in prostitution before they began to use drugs or alcohol; others were already using drugs but this increased after entry. 32% became involved in prostitution before the age of 18.<sup>10</sup>
- A Home Office report from 2004 found that over 50% of the 333 women studied were under 18 when they entered prostitution, and over 75% were under 21.<sup>11</sup> It also outlines the factors that make

<sup>10</sup> (See note 1 for source.)

<sup>11</sup> Marianne Hester and Nicole Westmarland, *Tackling Street Prostitution: Towards an Holistic Approach Home Office Research Study 279*, 2004 <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20040722020725/http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs04/hors279.pdf> p.61.

young people vulnerable to entering prostitution including: sexual abuse in childhood; being in local authority care (37%); having left the family home before or at the age of 16 (68%); and early contact with the criminal justice system<sup>12</sup>. Unsurprisingly, around two-thirds of the women surveyed had no qualifications, almost double the rate in the general population, indicating disrupted education and reduced employment opportunities.

- *Breaking down the Barriers* also reported on what happens to women whilst they are involved: 61% of their sample reported experiences of violence from buyers; 77% had experienced housing problems/homelessness; 79% had suffered physical and/or mental health problems. Another Home Office report found that women in prostitution may be 12 times more likely than women in the general population to be murdered.<sup>13</sup>
- *I'm No Criminal* reports on the impact of the current legal regime in England and Wales on women involved in prostitution. Although conviction rates for soliciting have decreased, the impact of present and past policy is significant.<sup>14</sup> Disclosure and barring service regulations mean that women's prostitution-related records are still disclosed many years after they have exited, preventing them taking up education and employment opportunities. The report concludes that prostitution-specific criminal records are 'uniquely discriminatory, arbitrary, irrational and disproportionate for women involved, or formerly involved, in prostitution'.<sup>15</sup>
- The House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee report, *Universal Credit and "survival sex": Second Report of Session 2019-20*, describes the impact for some women of how Universal Credit operates, driving them into or back into prostitution in order to meet immediate needs including food and rent. Based on listening to personal testimony and on the experience of front-line charities, the report notes that the delays and debt associated with the new system push women into what seem like quick fixes but then leads to them getting trapped.<sup>16</sup>

For most women involved, prostitution is part of a complex life situation in which factors from personal experience interact with kinds of social disadvantage which increase their vulnerability and create areas of risk and neglect. For black and minority ethnic women, there are additional layers of structural disadvantage. Although a full understanding must be intersectional, there is also a primary reality. Gender plays a determining role in these factors and forces. In the words of one report, 'Gender expectations normalise gender inequality and some forms of violence and abuse, and socialisation shapes responses in ways which increase the risk of negative outcomes'.<sup>17</sup> In other words, girls grow up in a world in which men still have more power; and for some girls and women, this is experienced in sexual abuse, domestic violence, grooming and coercive relationships. These experiences affect women's sense of themselves and disturb their relationships with their own bodies. But the deep intra-personal impact is not the only story here. The social structures and cultural attitudes which tolerate inequalities and do not adequately prevent or protect women from male violence are also implicated.

<sup>12</sup> *Tackling Street Prostitution*, p.78.

<sup>13</sup> Cited in "*I'm No Criminal*" p.12. See also C. Gabrielle Salfati, Alison R. James and Lynn Ferguson, 'Prostitute Homicides: A Descriptive Study', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 23.4 (2008) 505-543, which reports that women involved in street prostitution 'are 60-100 times more likely to be murdered than are nonprostitute females'. p.506

<sup>14</sup> Between 2004 and 2016, 6,030 women and 68 men were found guilty of soliciting, a significant decrease from earlier decades of higher conviction rates. *I'm No Criminal*, p.12

<sup>15</sup> *I'm No Criminal*, p.7

<sup>16</sup> <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201920/cmselect/cmworpen/83/83.pdf>

<sup>17</sup> *Mapping the Maze: The core components of a gender sensitive service for women experiencing multiple disadvantage: A review of the literature*. (London: AVA and Agenda, 2017) <https://www.mappingthemaze.org.uk/resources/#filter=archive-post--research> p.4



### 3 The focus on freedom

In planning this research, we decided to focus primarily on the themes of freedom and agency. As already noted, there is existing research that covers how girls and women become vulnerable to prostitution, what happens to them whilst they are involved and the structural and other barriers to exit. There is also good understanding of the practices needed to support them effectively.<sup>18</sup> This research leans on and learns from these sources but takes a different path.

Freedom and agency, understood as the capacity to determine your own life, are constitutive of what it means to be a person and a citizen. In ethical terms, exercising authentic freedom expresses our dignity. In the Catholic ethical worldview, freedom is essential so that we can direct ourselves toward goodness. Our dignity is realised when we act ‘according to a knowing and free choice that is personally motivated and prompted from within’.<sup>19</sup> Freedom is a social and personal good in itself; it is also a necessary condition for seeking other goods, including playing our part in creating a fair and compassionate society. It is also a deeply relational reality, realised in or limited by social and personal relationships. None of us ever have perfect freedom; we all discover limits and pressures that constrain and challenge us. We all make choices that go wrong. But we know it is important to discover and exercise freedom. In the arena of sexual activity, freedom is closely related to consent, a principle that has become increasingly important as we seek to behave in ways worthy of our dignity as persons.

In relation to prostitution, freedom, consent and agency lie at the heart of tensions about how society and legal systems should respond. In the abolitionist view, the vast majority of women who ‘enter’ prostitution are not making a genuine choice and most describe feeling trapped rather than free whilst they remain involved.<sup>20</sup> The sex of prostitution is not something to which they give ‘knowing and free’ consent. They are coerced by money or threats, or driven by desperation in other ways, in conditions in which their agency and freedom are severely limited. In this view, prostitution is both exploitative and intrinsically harmful. The process of exit involves a gradual re-building of their agency and freedom, often with crucial help from professional staff. In this view, a good society should protect the equality of all its citizens by measures which aim to prevent the coercive force of male demand to buy sex and to end the exploitation endemic to the sex industry.<sup>21</sup> It should also work to restore the conditions in which women affected by prostitution can recover their freedom and agency.

In the opposite view, the ‘sex worker rights’ perspective, it is argued that prostitution is a choice which some women make, expressing their rights. Those who take this position argue that it is unacceptable to restrict women’s freedom to choose to sell their own bodies in sexual services and so they oppose the Nordic or abolitionist model of legislation. Advocates of ‘sex worker rights’ propose that the harms of prostitution can be reduced by decriminalising all those involved, and/or regulating prostitution as a normal sector of employment, and/or increasing the economic options available to women living in poverty. In this view, the harm of prostitution is in the conditions associated with it, rather than intrinsic to the transaction itself.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>18</sup> *Mapping the Maze*.

<sup>19</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html) para 17.

<sup>20</sup> See the Appendix for further explanation of the legal strategies associated with abolitionism. An abolitionist view is also associated with a radical feminist position.

<sup>21</sup> This is often referred to in shorthand as ‘the sex buyer law’, in which the buying of sexual access to another person’s body is a criminal act. A full commitment to abolitionism involves other elements as well. See the appendix for more details.

<sup>22</sup> See Martha Nussbaum, “‘Whether from Reason or Prejudice’: Taking Money for Bodily Services”, *Journal of Legal Studies*, 27 (1998), 693–724 for a measured account of this argument. This view is also associated with liberal feminism.

In practice in the UK, the charities working with women affected by prostitution take diverse positions but find common ground in the need to reduce harm to women involved in prostitution. There are activist voices on both sides, including women who have been involved in prostitution. At both local and national level, pragmatic responses operate in tension with debates about the need for a stronger legal regime to protect women from exploitation.

This report does not evaluate or assess all the arguments or evidence associated with this debate. Its purpose is to enable a deeper understanding of what happens to the freedom of women involved in prostitution, by listening to the women themselves. At the heart of the debates about prostitution law and policy there is a significant ethical question about whose freedom matters, and how we understand what freedom means for women, taking into account the institutionalised inequalities of our society and culture. If we are to find our way to a better social arrangement, towards a society in which all women can flourish, we need to think deeply about what freedom and agency mean, what harms we can recognise and protect against in legal terms; and what kind of social consensus can be built to change all the conditions and attitudes which allow prostitution to happen. This matters for all of us; not just women and not just those with a faith-based concern. Social and legal change needs an underpinning of understanding and consensus about what is good, right and possible.

### The research methodology

The report now moves directly to the women's voices, because they are the most important part of this report. If you would find it helpful to understand more about the methodology used in the research before you hear what they say, this is explained further in the Appendix, together with a summary of the legal context in the UK. You may wish to read this first.

The appendix also explains in more detail the extracts from 'I poems' scattered through the text. These are prose poems drawn from the individual women's voices as they spoke in the interviews that work as small encounters with a woman's *self* as she struggles to make sense of her experience.

### How we speak and what we mean

The language we use when we talk about prostitution matters a great deal. Language is used in wider debate to indicate positions and claims, and women@thewell participates in those debates. More importantly, women@thewell has worked out its own way of speaking, based on its values and experience listening to the women who come to their door. So this report talks about women's lives being affected by prostitution, never about 'being prostitutes'. I have tried to be careful about expressions that assume prostitution is a free choice, such as 'women who sell sex'. I always avoid describing prostitution as 'work' or 'sex work' because this normalises and sanitises something which is an unacceptable harm.

**women@thewell** has published a valuable guide which explains how and why language matters in this area.

*Mind Your Language: how views, opinions and policy on prostitution and the global sex trade are shaped by terminology* is written by Julie Bindel and available from [watw.org.uk](http://watw.org.uk).

## PART TWO:

# There's always a door

### 1 Introduction

One of the women who took part, when asked to choose a photograph that spoke to her about freedom, said, 'freedom, is that even a thing?'<sup>23</sup> Our ideas of freedom are complex and shaped by our experience and the cultures we live within. In a liberal western culture such as the UK, the surface assumption is that freedom means being able to do what I want, when I want. But reflection points to deeper levels and structures which enable or disable possibilities and determine limits. How the women in this research described their lives reveals the complexity and ambiguities of freedom and agency.

### 2 What it means to be free

As they spoke about their lives, the women described what first pulled them into the world of prostitution. For several, there were experiences of abuse in childhood and early adolescence that had a traumatic impact, which meant that their vulnerability was increased when circumstances conspired to push them into prostitution. One older woman who had been abused in childhood and spent many years in prostitution recalled how the first steps happened: 'I come out of care, they just bunged me in this flat, nothing in it, no nothing and I thought well, how am I gonna furnish my place, and then someone showed me the ropes...' Another younger woman described growing up in poverty and 'always being told to get out of the house, threatened and stuff' and how her desire to escape and to feel good about herself pushed her towards the sex trade. Some were too young to realise what was happening:

*When I first started, I was 16, and the client that did it, I didn't think there was anything wrong with it. I thought it was completely normal; I didn't even bat an eyelid then. I should have, I should have known that was fundamentally wrong.*

***A young woman still involved.***

For other women, prostitution began as a result of getting involved with a dangerous partner, particularly with men who take or deal drugs. One woman described it as 'my stupidity', finding herself in a relationship with a drug dealer. When I asked if she knew where this would lead, she said 'No. No way. It was step by step.' Another woman wrestled with whether it was a choice she made, because debt, desperation and isolation left her no other option when health factors meant she could no longer stay in her job.

I think it was a choice  
I hadn't had any support  
I was, where do I go,  
I didn't have  
I don't want  
I knew I couldn't go back  
I was trying to change  
I kept trying and trying  
I've got to make a choice, now  
I just sort of gave it a go  
I didn't know how to handle it,  
I needed to worm my way out of it.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> I used a set of 17 photographs in the interviews, and invited the participants to choose and interpret images that spoke to them. For more information, see the Appendix.

<sup>24</sup> This text contains extracts from I poems drawn from the voices of the women who took part. An I poem distils out from a personal narrative all the statements in which she speaks about herself as a subject, in statements beginning with 'I'. See the Appendix for further explanation of I poems.

Looking back at how they became entangled in prostitution is complicated for some women. There is a certain sense that perhaps they made a choice, 'but not a real choice', and gradual realisation that they were not really free, or that a step which seemed small led inexorably towards a life they did not choose and in which they do not feel free. It is hard to see this or admit what has happened, not least because it matters to all of us to feel in charge of our lives. The women to whom I listened wanted to take responsibility for their lives, but the circumstances they described contained little of what makes real freedom possible. One woman commented

*I used to go, "I choose what I'm do, I'm a whore", but then, the more I've talked to support workers, the more I'm like, well, actually I was pretty desperate, or this man was doing this. It's always, it's more complicated than that, there's like a really grey area with choice...*

Another woman still involved asked whether a choice really was a choice when you know it will harm you: 'if you know that your choices are not going to, if they are even choices, that what you do isn't going to hurt you, you're not forced into it, then to me, that's freedom.' For some, the experience of being controlled by abusive men defined their normality to the extent that the prospect of being able to make choices was 'really scary'. One woman who had managed to escape from controlling relationships reflected that 'you have no sense of yourself. So, having a sense of yourself is what freedom is. Being allowed to know who you are.'

The images the women chose to express what freedom meant to them expressed this combination of internal struggle and external controls. The photograph most frequently chosen when I asked about what freedom meant showed an empty birdcage, with the door open and birds flying just above it. One woman who had managed to exit explained 'I always imagined myself to be this bird that was caged up. You know when a bird flutters, like it's dying to come out, that was how I was.' Two other images resonated for several women; a photograph of two hands raised in the air, one still carrying a handcuff, the other having broken free, and a photograph of keys attached to a miniature house on a keyring. The handcuffs photo evoked the depth of struggle involved for some women; one survivor found it difficult to speak at this point, describing her journey to freedom as 'a lot of work, nearly killed me, but I'm still here. It was a fight, going through nightmares, going through panic attacks, flashbacks.'

The practitioners interviewed for this research also describe the lack of freedom in which prostitution begins and which makes exit so difficult. A senior manager commented 'I don't find it hard at all to understand why women do it, because I absolutely get what desperation does to you, what poverty does to you.' They recognise the women's ambivalence and strategies for survival, noticing how difficult it is to acknowledge being involved in prostitution. They observe the controlling and exploitative relationships in which some women find themselves: 'a lot of the women, they don't understand, what is a relationship, is this person taking advantage of me? But he says he loves me, that's why he's arranging my clients.' Part of supporting the women is about reflecting back to them a different way of seeing what is happening in their lives: what a healthy relationship looks like, or what they could decide about their own lives.

Some of the complexities of freedom and agency begin to emerge in how the women describe what happened to them, and how they think about their own freedom. At one level, they wanted to claim that they are free, citing small daily autonomies as evidence. But they also described how they were or still are controlled or captive, trapped in relationships, addictions and financial dependence on income from prostitution. To some extent, they are aware of choices, but often these are 'choices' only on the surface;



they will not lead to good or genuinely desired things. It was also clear how difficult it is to see the structural forces which bear down on our freedom. For the women, particularly when they are still involved, it is hard enough to recognise the bad relationships or the abuse or neglect. Connecting these to an awareness of how gender structures socialise women and men into certain ideas about sexual behaviour or how the sex trade is fuelled by capitalism and organised crime seems remote from individual personal experience.

Rachel Moran, a survivor-activist and author of a searing memoir of her experience, points out that international research has shown that ‘women’s views of prostitution shift markedly depending on whether they are currently or formerly prostituted’.<sup>25</sup> Another survivor-activist who took part in this research offered a stronger analysis, pointing out how girls are ‘groomed from a very young age to be sexualised and pornified’, a process in which capitalism plays a part:

*It doesn’t surprise me that women think they choose a life, and they believe.... because we’re groomed for it, so I don’t believe they get a job description and a person specification and a job trial, no they don’t, because for the vast majority of women, there is some vulnerability why they are in that sex trade.*

The women’s voices and experience disclose insidious and incremental ways in which coercion into prostitution happens. It is often impossible to name or notice when it is happening to you. It may even seem as though you are making choices for yourself. Listening to the narratives of individual lives shows how a thin idea of freedom masks another reality, in which girls and women are deceptively caught into a world which will harm them and in which they become frozen. Their narratives also show the importance of someone offering or inviting another view of what is happening to you, a view which holds open possibilities of freedom. We contribute to each other’s freedom not just by opening doors to services or employment, but crucially by affirming that agency is possible and that other futures can be desired and constructed.

### 3 Living behind a wall

*The sense of ‘otherness’ for the woman ensnared in this lifestyle is so strong that she begins to regard herself as so utterly different from other members of society, that it does not feel possible or feasible on any level to partake in that society. By that I mean it does not feel possible to get a regular job, to undertake education, or sometimes even to form relationships with people outside her sphere of reality.*

*Rachel Moran, **Paid For**, p.6*

We take for granted the freedom of social participation, and we mostly assume the right not to be judged or discriminated against. For the women in this research, both are compromised. They feel excluded from what they see as ‘normality’. They don’t feel able to go to the places other people go or to build the kind of life society considers ‘normal’ whether this means shopping in the high street or finding a job. The world of prostitution is like a prison in which they are captive, although they can see the world around them from which they feel excluded. They spoke about how in this outside world, they have to pretend, or hide themselves. They feel the gulf between the world they live in and the world of other people, and speak about how hard it is to cross back into normality. Several women described this:

25 Julie Bindel, *The Pimping of Prostitution: Abolishing the Sex Work Myth* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2017) p.170.

*There's a bit of a wall between me and everyone else and I'm a bit invisible I guess.*

*You feel like you can't really touch the real world.*

*We're invisible, and it's just a case of getting people to notice that, but not to leap in like we're subhuman and they can save us from corruption. We're not corrupt and we're not immoral. We're not dirty and we don't need to be cleaned up.*

Some women who were still involved spoke about the ways they disguised themselves and hid their identities. They use other names, or wear wigs, or move around covered up so that their faces cannot be seen. One woman described the importance of her first step towards seeking help being via a phone line. It was the anonymity that made her feel safe;

They care, even though I've never met them, they don't know what I look like, at all, I still know that they will be there for me and that just meant you could talk quite openly without worrying about anything, I don't know, just a bit of trust, because they didn't know what I looked like. I'm really anxious about people knowing where I am and who I am.'

For some, anonymity matters because their families do not know about their prostitution lives; some live in two worlds, spending time with friends who live in 'normality', but always aware of a part of their lives they cannot speak about.

I'm an escort  
I don't know how my views will come across  
It's not something I would even want to speak to  
a regular person about  
I spoke to someone before  
I don't even say anything  
I think the stigma would still be there  
I'd still be labelled.

The prostitution world traps them. One of the photographs most frequently chosen by the women to express something about their lives was an image of a spider in a dew-covered web. They talked about being caught in a web, in all its sticky filaments, unable to get free; 'I'm wherever the fly is in there'. Webs too are invisible; 'it's there but it's unseen'. Whilst for some, the web was all the forces that hold them captive, for others the web was the work of building security and freedom, but here too, there is struggle: 'I think with a lot of us, we keep building that web, and somebody keeps coming and getting it down, and we keep trying to build it again'.

The charities matter here: 'they help us stick it back together'. A practitioner commented 'There'll be times when they do get stuck. There'll be times when they do fall back into that web. But then they've done it once, and there's support and encouragement.' The practitioners work in-between the women and the world of normality, building bridges and opening doors. Some of the ways they accompany the women are in one sense ordinary - visiting an exhibition, or taking a trip to the beach - but the ordinary has greater significance here. One senior practitioner described how these activities help the women to feel nourished and entitled to be normal 'like everybody else'.

This is not the social exclusion of material poverty or destitution – although the exclusion of the prostitution world frequently overlaps with homelessness and other kinds of insecurity. This is an exclusion of not being able to be visible in who you are and what is happening to you, and lacking any confidence that anyone will help. Another of the other images the women

could choose was the Munch painting, 'The Scream'. One of the women who chose that photograph said 'You're gonna end up on a corner, screaming, and nobody's gonna help you. You're known as the local whore and you're not worth anything'. The women are aware that the prostitution life-world in which they live affects what happens when they try to achieve steps towards freedom. They live with the fear of being revealed as involved in prostitution, which could mean that they lose their children, or they are not eligible for social housing. One woman described her sense that society was saying 'you're not allowed to be any more than that', because you're 'not the perfect kind of victim'.

#### 4 Somewhere people can't get in

The themes of security, safety and fear were significant in the women's experience. Each of the women who took part was living with, or had lived with, levels of fear that dominate their lives. The threat of physical or sexual violence is ever-present when they meet clients. Women who had managed to exit prostitution spoke about instances of rape and sexual abuse. Those still involved communicated the fear in more abstract ways, speaking about how their lives are controlled by others and describing how they manage the risks they face. Fear prevents freedom in both practical and psychological ways. Most of them took for granted that women in their situation don't report violence to the police, because they don't trust the criminal justice system to take their experience seriously, and for some, because they have seen or experienced corruption and judgemental attitudes. So they have to look after their own safety; 'you can never be relaxed', one woman said. Another said 'I'm really paranoid. I get very frightened and I can be set off by small things. It's just kind of seeped into every part of my life.'

Even when they begin to move towards exit, fear still has a grip: 'I'm away from my (pimp), so in that way, things are better, but there's a kind of, just this weight of... panic, of it going back again, so having a fear of... fear of losing it, I guess, and that fear stops me moving any further.' There is a great sense of isolation in the prostitution world; 'you're on your own, with just lots and lots of thoughts'. The difficulty of 'figuring stuff out by myself' stops women from taking steps away from the world they know, the world that has become normal to them. They fear being alone; one senior practitioner described an older woman who allowed a punter to demand sex every day in exchange for occasional bags of shopping, even though she knew it was abusive;

*because the consequence is having nobody, so actually the damage of being lonely and alone and afraid are.... well, given that, or being abused, I know what abuse looks like, that's OK, I can do that, it's this being alone that I can't do.*

They also fear having no money; they are realistic about the difficulties of getting a regular job when you have no qualifications, no relevant experience, and no acceptable way of explaining your lack of a job history. If you have a criminal record related to prostitution, the impact on employment possibilities defeats hope and diminishes you. Even volunteering in many fields in which women might be interested is frequently impossible because their criminal records must be disclosed.<sup>26</sup>

*Security, safety and freedom are very closely linked. One woman who is working towards exit chose the photograph of a set of keys attached to a miniature house to express her idea of freedom. Freedom, she said, is having keys to somewhere that's yours, that no-one else has, that you can lock yourself away and be... that's a giant part of freedom. Having somewhere where people can't get in.*

26 See *I'm No Criminal* for a fuller explanation of the impact of criminal records on women affected by prostitution.

All the women were acutely able to judge which spaces and people were safe, and which were not. Most had lived in hostels or other situations which were not safe; and they described the charities providing support as places where they do feel safe, partly because these are women-only spaces. For some women who have experienced sexual exploitation in prostitution, spaces in which they will not encounter men are crucial. One of the most important forms of safety is a place to live; another woman who had managed to exit but lives with long-term serious health problems talked about the impact of getting into social housing. It was a door opening to freedom: 'I had my house, even if I had nothing in my house, I had my house.'

Safety matters in another way. Unless you feel safe, it is almost impossible to begin to imagine a path to exit. As one woman still involved commented, 'being in a safe and secure place then enables you to develop other things'. Another talked about how if you don't feel safe, you don't really feel you have choices. Freedom, she insisted, only exists when you feel safe. And safety is not just external and physical, but also a matter of your internal self, your feelings, and your mental horizons. One woman who has managed to exit and survive described no longer living with a sense of threat as 'better than sex'. We laughed together in recognition of what many women might find familiar.

Living in this amount of fear is not normal. Neither is it acceptable that the social institutions which are meant to protect people from violence and harm do not work adequately for numerous women. It is one of the most basic responsibilities of government to ensure that people are safe from violence. Policing and criminal justice systems are gradually changing to work more effectively for women, but there is still much to be done.

## 5 The impact on women's selves

Prostitution does not just impact on women's bodies and their physical health. Some of the most powerful parts of the women's narratives described the impact on their sense of themselves, their interior world. Here the intrinsic harm of prostitution is made plain.

*I can guarantee that half the girls that are prostitutes don't like themselves. Because I didn't like myself, I hated myself. Every time that I slept with a guy for money, I hated myself, inside I just felt so horrible and dirty. An older woman who has exited.*

*It destroys your soul. It ... robs you of the rites of passage to growing from a child to an adult. I know some women go into it as adults, but... Do you know what, it's a really difficult question to answer. It smashed me into smithereens. A survivor-activist*

*There is no peace in prostitution. There is no peace in your body or your mind. There is no peace anywhere within you. I think, by nature, I am a peaceful person. I am someone who craves to be at peace within her own self. Since that was not possible in prostitution, I feel that my own necessity to be at peace with myself strongly contributed to my leaving.*

**Rachel Moran, *Paid For*, p.283**

*The standards of life which we all desire, that of being happy, fulfilled and content, begin to slip away from the woman in prostitution because she does not experience these for herself or see them evidenced in the lives of the women around her. When something is less attainable, it is less often reached for. I got to the point early on in prostitution where I saw being happy as simply unrealistic, and I was right. I didn't know any women who were happy in prostitution and I didn't meet any later years either.*

**Rachel Moran, *Paid For*, p. 60**



Some women explained what they had to do inside themselves to survive whilst submerged in the world of prostitution. One woman talked about being absent from herself – ‘I feel like I’m not there’ or frozen. Using a photograph of a statue of two horses covered in ice and dripping icicles, she continued ‘it’s almost like an icy kind of feeling, but underneath there’s not much there, and that’s sort of all dark underneath it’. Women found different ways of separating or dissociating themselves from what was happening. One woman who had exited described this in a vivid phrase; ‘You brush it off, you pick yourself back up... don’t wallow in it, you wallow in it, you live in the past, you’ll end up dead.’ This internal work is costly. They talked about not knowing any longer what they like, or what they want, and how their desires are reduced to small things.<sup>27</sup> They no longer know themselves. Some escape through drugs or alcohol, which makes life worse. As one woman observed, it’s easier to exit prostitution than to free yourself from addiction. Interpreting the photograph of the spider’s web, one woman reflected ‘I was in a web, a web of lies and deceit. I was trapped in this web, drugs were the spider, my spider. The drugs was in charge of me’.

One woman still involved described a different strategy of detachment in her interior world. ‘You can keep something back’, she said, and find an internal freedom. ‘I learned very early on, that the only way to escape was to keep a little bit of you very, very safe.’ ‘There’s always a door’, she continued, describing the significance of being able to see the sky even when she was literally captive. Even in a cage, she said, using the photo showing some birds escaping from a cage into a bright sky, you can still fly a little. She also reflected that she knew she could survive prostitution because something worse had already happened to her when she was a young teenager, and she had survived that experience.

I’ve learned since  
I think I cried  
And I don’t cry  
I was so scared  
I didn’t know until it happened  
I literally remember  
I still flinch

The practitioners confirm the same themes. They see how the women ‘split’ or cut themselves off from what has happened in prostitution. ‘They become shells’, one practitioner said. Another described how ‘the harm is about what spaces does she have to go to, to sell sex to somebody she cannot stand’. An experienced senior staff member pointed out how women find it difficult to do self-care; ‘they cannot tell you how to look after themselves.’ They are sensitive to how the women’s strategies for coping play out; how some minimise or re-interpret what they’re doing, avoiding the language of prostitution. They notice how difficult it is whilst you’re in the prostitution world to think about what is happening. They acknowledge that some women claim their involvement is a choice freely made; but they see what the women find it harder to admit; that the need to feed a drugs habit or financial desperation stands behind their claims, or that their struggles with mental health conditions tell another story. They see a significant absence; that if women have not experienced a healthy relationship, it is hard for them to recognise the abusive relationships in which they live. They also see how women feel worse when the narrative of personal choice is pushed towards them; for some this leads to self-despising and self-blame. They feel they ought to be coping with their lives, when they are not.

One of the tools I used to interpret the women’s voices was to listen

27 In *Three Women*, Lisa Taddeo comments, when speaking about her own mother, ‘There’s nothing safer than wanting nothing’. (London: Bloomsbury, 2019)

to the different stories each woman told about her self. Each woman's story contained an array of responses; a self that felt trapped; a self that recognised compromises made; a self that was lost or unknown. There was always a moral self, a self that in some way resisted being reduced to an object by prostitution. Even if this moral self was able to possess only a tiny hope, a small aspiration, it was there.

I really struggled to get the flat  
I'm really sick.  
I was fighting the social worker.  
I always have problems  
I'm just not very good at stuff  
I kind of help people as well.  
I get a little bit of money, because I'm sick,  
So I give people that £5 or £10 if they need it.

It is not surprising that the tools and concepts associated with trauma become crucial in understanding what the women have experienced. Trauma is what happens when a person 'feels threatened by an external force that seeks to annihilate them and against which they are unable to resist and which overwhelms their capacity to cope'.<sup>28</sup> It may relate to a single event or to repeated events such as the constant threat of violence in a relationship. People react differently to potentially traumatic experiences; some manage to recover; others suffer life-long damage. Trauma leads to 'a loss of sense of self, a breakdown in normal knowing and feeling, and a paralysing lack of agency in the threat of the harm suffered'.<sup>29</sup> The damage it inflicts is played out in symptoms such as excessive vigilance, dissociation, powerlessness and isolation. Prostitution and its associated harms such as addiction and homelessness meet many elements of the diagnosis of trauma, even before childhood experiences of abuse and neglect are factored in. If women have experienced sexual abuse in childhood, they have already learned in their bodies to expect violation of their bodily security.<sup>30</sup> Understanding the impact of trauma helps to explain why women involved in prostitution struggle to find their own agency, their capacity to act, even when they long to exit.

## 6 Reflections on agency and consent

One of the aims of this research is concerned to bring the experience of women whose lives are affected by prostitution into dialogue with ethical perspectives drawn from Christian faith and other sources. Their narratives explain the ambiguities and untruthfulness of any assertion that women 'choose' prostitution. When their age of first exposure, their childhood experiences, their exploitative relationships, their social invisibility and exclusion and their lack of safety and security are all recognised, it is clear why many voices, including women@the well, argue that this is a form of trafficking or coercion, both in how it starts and in how it becomes imprisoning.

The women involved in the research puzzled over whether they made choices. We live in a culture and society with an individualistic and superficial idea of what choice and freedom mean. Often it is no more than flexibility; I can go out when I like, or choose whether or not to work today. Christopher Craig Brittain suggests that choice has been 'fetishised' in ways that suit capitalism and the marketing of sex<sup>31</sup>. We are all seduced by the idea that choices mean freedom. But for women dragged into prostitution through 'choiceless choices',

28 Serene Jones, *Trauma and Grace: Theology in a Ruptured World* (Edinburgh: John Knox, 2009) p.13.

29 *Trauma and Grace*, p.15

30 Pierre Bourdieu points out that what we learn in our bodies is not like knowledge that we *acquire*, but rather 'something that one is'. Also see Maddie Coy's discussion in 'This body which is not mine: The notion of the habit body, prostitution and (dis)embodiment', *Feminist Theory* 10.1 61-75. pp.63-4.

31 Christopher Craig Brittain, 'On the Demonisation and Fetishisation of Choice in Christian Sexual Ethics', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 27.2 (2014) 144-66 p.152.

there is very little freedom, perhaps none at all. A different way forward is offered if we think about the women's experience using the idea of consent rather than choice. Consent is particularly relevant as it is now increasingly seen as the critical issue in whether sexual activity is morally acceptable.<sup>32</sup> The #metoo movement has revealed the social complexity of consent as well as raising awareness of what it means and how easily it is ignored.

Women like myself who were forced by nobody need to find our voices and assert that that this does not mean we were forced by *nothing*. It is a very human foolishness to insist on the presence of a knife or a gun or a fist in order to recognise the existence of force, when often the most compelling forces on this earth present intangibly, in coercive situations. My prostitution experience was coerced. For those of us who fall into the 'free' category, it is *life* that does the coercing.

**Rachel Moran, *Paid For*, p.227**

Hille Haker explores consent in relation to sexual exploitation using the Palermo Protocol, the UN agreed definition of trafficking.<sup>33</sup> The point she makes is that consent alone is not sufficient to determine whether coercion or force is present in a way which cancels freedom.<sup>34</sup> Just because a person consents does not mean her human rights are not violated. Other factors affect what the consent means, including where the power lies in any relationship or situation, what the person's vulnerabilities are, and the context in which it is happening. So where money is involved, and a woman is in urgent need or unfree in other ways, the exchange is in fact coercive. There is common ground here with the arguments of many strands of feminism about women's rights to sexual and bodily autonomy, but Haker's use of the Palermo principles goes further. She starts from a foundation of human dignity based in Christian faith and shared by many ethical traditions. She sees that dignity as expressed and realised in a person's moral identity and freedom to act. But our freedom is first of all constrained by a principle of relationships; no-one has absolute freedom. We only act rightly when we respect other people's freedom and dignity. So when a buyer of sex proposes what Carole Pateman calls a 'unilateral use of a woman's body by a man in exchange for money', he is treating her not as a person but as an object, a commodity. Her 'consent' does not change the reality that she is being used in a way that denies her dignity and personhood.

Haker also makes another crucial point. She starts from a strong idea of how we are all embodied persons. Our bodies are not things we possess but inextricably linked to our self-identity and fundamental to how we experience the world and how we communicate. Sexual identity is part of our self-identity, and also 'a site of radical vulnerability'.<sup>35</sup> Sexuality, she argues, is like pain. It cannot be detached from the person experiencing it. We can never just 'use' our bodies. We always are bodies. This is why consent in sexual activity matters so much; because when it is absent, the damage is greater than in many other kinds of vulnerability. Women suffer many other distressing and unjust conditions; destitution, homelessness, or forced or exploitative working conditions. But these do not cause the harms to their sense of themselves that women describe from the sex of prostitution.

32 The recent Conservative Party Commission on Human Rights Report, *The Limits of Consent: Prostitution in the UK*, focuses on this issue. [http://conservativehumanrights.com/news/2019/CPHRC\\_Consent\\_Report.pdf](http://conservativehumanrights.com/news/2019/CPHRC_Consent_Report.pdf) See pp.20–21. This report is discussed further in Part Three.

33 Article 3, paragraph (a) of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons defines Trafficking in Persons as the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the 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. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs. Paragraph (b) continues: *The consent of a victim of trafficking in persons to the intended exploitation set forth in paragraph (a) shall be irrelevant where any of the means set forth in subparagraph (a) have been used.* (emphasis by Haker)

34 Hille Haker, 'Catholic Feminist Ethics Re-considered: The case of sex trafficking', *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 43.2 (2015).

35 Haker p.232.

The women describe how the sex in prostitution makes them feel, how it shatters their self-hood, their safety, and their sense of being part of society. Maddy Coy is an academic working in this field who has listened to the voices of women in prostitution talking about their bodies. She explores the impact when women in prostitution are treated as objects. As they experience violation of their body boundaries, they lose the sense that their bodies are their own; they feel estranged from their own bodies, which then ‘clamour to be comforted’.<sup>36</sup> Coy points out that prostitution is ‘unique in the investment of the self that is required due to the dynamic between sexuality, the body and sense of self’.<sup>37</sup> Women absorb the sense of being disposable. Elsewhere she summarises that women are required to be ‘substantively present but subjectively absent’.<sup>38</sup> This is crucial in understanding the harm of prostitution.

There are related insights in Catholic thinking about sex. In explaining why trafficking for sexual exploitation is wrong, Cardinal Nichols pointed out that a ‘fundamental aspect of Catholic teaching about sex is that sexual acts must always take place within the context of authentic freedom’. In the Catholic vision, he continues, this is because sex unites people at their deepest level ‘in a completeness of self-giving’ that underpins the permanent commitment of marriage. So ‘there is no place in sexual relations for domination, aggression, instrumentalisation or any kind of de-humanisation of the person’.<sup>39</sup> Prostitution can never be a context of ‘authentic freedom’ because the exchange which it constitutes is not about *self-giving* but about instrumental and de-humanising use of someone else’s body in a way which denies their self-hood. This is where the violence lies in the unwanted non-mutual sex of prostitution.

## 7 The moral achievement of survival

*I struggle with the term “choice”, because we talk about women “deciding to survive” rather than “making a choice”. And I think most women will decide to survive because the survival spirit is mostly strong.*

*An experienced practitioner*

*We didn’t often collectively examine to any great depth the reality of our circumstances. We didn’t get into protracted discussions about the psychology of it, but we did discuss the feeling of being abused, without labelling it as such. Our daily reality was this: we had enough to be dealing with in trying to stay alive with none of our bones getting broken and none of our mental screws coming loose.*

***Rachel Moran, Paid For, p.108***

The comments above from a practitioner and a survivor resonated repeatedly with my experience of the women who took part in this research. They used their energies and capacities in the hard work of survival against frightening odds. I came to regard this as both a practical and a moral achievement. The selves the women showed me recalled some lines from Annie Dillard; ‘I am a frayed and nibbled survivor in a fallen world and I am getting along. I am aging and eaten and have done my share of eating too...’.<sup>40</sup> Their stories contained the evidence of their survival; their capacity to delight in children, or to enjoy silly games with friends; a concern for others whom they saw as vulnerable, such as elderly people in their neighbourhoods or young women getting pulled towards risky relationships; and their hopes for their own

36 Maddy Coy, ‘This body which is not mine’ The notion of the habit body, prostitution and (dis)embodiment’, *Feminist Theory*, 10.1 61–75. p.70.

37 Coy, ‘This body which is not mine’, p.66

38 Coy, Maddy (ed.) *Prostitution, Harm and Gender Inequality: Theory, research and policy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) p.187

39 Cardinal Nichols’ address to the Inter-Faith Consultation Conference, 9th February 2015: *Mobilising Faith Communities in Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict* <https://rcdow.org.uk/cardinal/addresses/mobilising-faith-communities-in-ending-sexual-violence-in-conflict/>

40 *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (Harper Perennial: 2000; first publication, 1974)



future, the recovery of small desires. Their aspirations were modest – to have a safe place to live, to have a normal life. For one woman, a desirable future was to be able to go shopping in the high street and to have a small dog. One older woman who had exited was determined to write a book about her life, so that her grandson would understand. A younger woman hoped to return to studying art.

The women also expressed their moral selves in other ways. One theme that surprised me concerned the way some of the women saw the money involved in prostitution. There was ambivalence and a kind of moral resistance in their attitudes. One woman who is still involved said ‘I’m awful with the money, I give it away quite a lot, I can’t have it, I feel quite bad about it, so even though I’ve got it, it’s not quite there.’ A senior practitioner described how some women see it as ‘dirty money’; ‘as soon as they earn it, they get rid of it’. They ‘burn it’ or give it to friends. Some don’t buy anything that would remind them of its source. Yet they also know that the power of money is part of what traps them in the prostitution world. As one woman commented, freedom is when your money is coming from a different place. The women’s moral selves react to their experience and wrestle with questions of meaning and worth even as they try to survive.

Rachel Moran points out that the cash involved in the prostitution exchange is ‘not only a legitimiser and a silencer. It is an obscurer, and a ruthlessly effective one’.<sup>41</sup> It hides from view the reality of exploitation. For the women, it adds another layer of self-blame. Moran reflects ‘This explains to me why I never saved anything I earned in prostitution and why I, in common with many other former prostitutes, was as poor coming out of it as I was going in to it.’<sup>42</sup> A study of the economics of prostitution for young women found that they typically retain less than 8% of the money exchanged, and that the costs far exceed the benefits over a person’s lifetime.<sup>43</sup>

Their stories also reported the costs of survival. Two women described losing their children. Several were still living with addiction, although stabilised and trying to reduce their use of drugs. Others described mental health conditions, panic attacks, anxiety and internal voices. Whilst some had partners, others were alone, sometimes with a radical distrust of relationships. One woman who had been groomed and pimped from the age of 15 said ‘I’ve never had intimacy in my life, ever’. Most had lived in hostels or experienced street homelessness. A couple described the compromises they had to make in their prostitution experiences; ‘you have to lie to get the money’. Another woman compared herself to the crocodile in one of the photographs, holding a turtle head in its mouth: ‘He’s eating to survive and that’s what I have to do’. When I asked what the turtle was, she said ‘the punters’. Some became caught up in dealing drugs through the coercive relationships in which they lived and/or their own experiences of addiction. Several had been raped or literally held captive, locked in a flat or somewhere worse.

Survival is a practical, moral and emotional challenge whilst women are involved in prostitution and in how they work towards exit, and then continuing as they live in the aftermath. The women’s experiences illustrate how difficult this is. When I asked one woman what was the most difficult thing, she replied ‘To stay away. To keep away. Because if something went wrong, I’d go straight back, I’d take it out on myself. Self-harm.’ Another described how ‘I feel like, even though I’m moving forward, you’re going forward and there’s like ten steps back, there’s always something blocking

41 Paid For, p.269.

42 Paid For, p.280.

43 Linda DeRiviere, ‘A Human Capital Methodology for Estimating the Lifelong Personal Costs of Young Women Leaving the Sex Trade’, *Feminist Economics* 12.3, 367–402 p.377–9.

you and you've got to fight through it to the next thing.' In the struggle to survive and move towards a different life, all the factors described earlier conspire against you: the external coercive forces, the fear in which you have lived, and the compromises you made to survive, as well as the self you have lost sight of.

*It wasn't quick; because I looked behind my shoulders all the time, I was scared stiff. I was absolutely petrified that they were going to come back on me; and also I'd lied to myself, and I'd lied to a lot of people, so I had to.... I didn't know who I was, I had no clue who I was.*

Some of the women found positive ideas that helped them; an older woman who had exited both prostitution and addiction said 'we're warriors'; 'stubbornness got me through'. It was important for others that they had chosen the path and pushed forward through many obstacles. When they talked about whether they chose prostitution, they were unsure and ambiguous. But when they talked about the achievement of exit, their sense of agency was clear. An older woman who had exited said 'I did it myself. I got that cage door open, bit by bit, then finally it opened and let me out.'

The sense of agency involved in exit is crucial. One young woman moving cautiously towards exit commented 'there's a really fancy word my worker told me, autonomy – that word, that it is mine to take, and that there isn't something external as much playing on it, that it is internal now'. One of the tensions in debates about prostitution is a concern that an abolitionist position assumes that women don't have agency and treats them as victims, unable to make choices for themselves. Haker and others reject this; just because a woman is not free in any real sense, this does not mean she is 'a non-agent or a passive victim'.<sup>44</sup> Survival inside and beyond prostitution involves constant choices and negotiations with circumstances. Haker criticises a document issued by a Vatican department which gives pastoral guidelines for work in this area that presents women as victims who need to be rescued.<sup>45</sup> The women who talked about their experience for this research told a different story; the journey of exit is a journey of claiming and using agency. They may have been victimised, but they are not to be reduced only to being victims. They have courage, strength and moral discernment in how they respond to their circumstances.

*If anyone supposes that leaving prostitution ought to be met with some sort of jubilant mental fanfare, I cannot say they are mistaken in all cases, but they are certainly mistaken in mine. On leaving prostitution, I swapped the daily living of it for the daily reeling from it. Both were uniquely painful, and the latter had its own flavours of fragmentation, new ones to contend with. It took me a long time to accept that what was good about me had survived prostitution; that the more basic elements of my 14 year old self still existed, and that they still existed inside me.*

**Rachel Moran, Paid For p.237**

## 8 Solidarities

As they work to survive and exit from the world of prostitution, the women talked about the isolation they often feel and the solidarities that helped. They acknowledged the value of the support they received from the services provided by the charities, particularly in their relationships with staff and volunteers. This was reflected in many comments they made about the people who worked with them:

<sup>44</sup> Haker, p.228.

<sup>45</sup> Haker, p.222, discussing part two of a document from the Pontifical Council for Pastoral Care of Migrants, *Guidelines For The Pastoral Care Of The Road : People on the Move* N° 104 (Suppl.), August 2007. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/migrants/pom2007\\_104-suppl/rc\\_pc\\_migrants\\_pom104-suppl\\_orientamenti-en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/migrants/pom2007_104-suppl/rc_pc_migrants_pom104-suppl_orientamenti-en.html)

*She just gets it, she doesn't judge me.*

*They just take you, it doesn't matter how, I've come in in bits, when I was using, I've come in in shit, rock bottom, and it's them that pick me up. They saved my life.*

*It is, it's literally, kind of probably saved my soul, at some level, because there's only so long...*

They were the first people I got in contact with, about three years ago, because I didn't trust services, I was really frightened of any kind of service, and I was really desperate, and I started talking to them on the phone once a week.

The elements which mattered to the women in the solidarity they experience in the charities' services were very clear: that they are not judged and feel accepted; that they experience the services and relationships as a safe place; and that they are supported to take their own steps, to make their own plans and go at their own pace. There are other practical aspects of the solidarity that they value, such as help with accessing housing or the simple hospitality of home-cooked meals and showers, but these depend on the safety of the space and the quality of the welcome.

The practitioners who work with them recognise that their work is to support women's own agency. For one experienced practitioner, this means letting go of her own power; 'I don't think it's about us, it's about enabling more power to be collected by her'. This is difficult; as she noted, externally, 'people want results', want to see exit figures. And internally, this means standing in a place of less power; 'I see it as a dance, because sometimes we have this weeping and powerlessness ourselves, and go, I just do not know what to do with her'. There is a self-emptying involved here that has a moral dimension.

A younger worker described shifting her mind set in order to value the small steps forward women take, reducing the number of clients for example. The experienced workers see how slow the journey to exit can be. One spoke about how for the women, the longer they have been in prostitution, 'the less hope they have of getting out'. But the practitioners hold on to the hope of exit even when the women themselves are 'quite damning' of the possibilities: 'you just have to keep going and hope that you will do the best for the service user'. Using the photograph of the tube station escalator, she commented 'You can't see the top of it, but you know you're going to reach the top, you're going to get there, you have to keep going, because you can't go back down if you've come all the way up.'

The approach that the practitioners take is informed by their own and their organisation's standpoint on prostitution, and also by what has been learned in the sector of women's services about good practice. *Mapping the Maze*, a literature review about services for women facing multiple disadvantage, describes several features which correspond with how the practitioners in this research described their work. These include working from 'a strengths-based empowerment model', aiming to increase women's power in all the spheres of their life, providing women-only spaces, and taking a trauma-informed perspective. One of the central principles is that 'women are experts in their own lives', and much importance is attached to the relationships formed between staff and those using services.<sup>46</sup> These principles ring true to a principle of respect for the women's dignity and further critique any sense that 'rescue' is an appropriate image of response.

These understandings of good practice are reflected strongly in how the practitioners speaking in this research describe their experience, but they do not cover another crucial element. The practitioners do not simply occupy a professional role. In different ways, this work involves their personal selves; they describe their emotions, the impact of their work and how they are changed by the women they encounter. Some described prejudice from others when they talked about what they do; others described the doubts they live with about whether what they do is really helpful, and bewilderment at some of the degradation inflicted on the women they meet. The commitment they share is to *women*, and particularly women who have experienced violence and exploitation. They enact what solidarity means; not just sympathy, but an instinct that each woman matters and a commitment to changing the conditions that prevent her from seeking her own well-being. The charities act as structures of solidarity and create spaces in which women can edge their way towards their greater freedom.

Jennifer Beste adds a theological perspective here. In her book exploring the impact of a different kind of sexual violence, the experience of incest, she discusses theological ideas about freedom in the light of what we learn from taking trauma seriously. She proposes that in the Christian worldview, God's grace is socially mediated through supportive relationships, relationships which offer hope for recovery from trauma and which foster people's freedom. She calls this 'the deep intersubjectivity of freedom', the role we can each play in enabling the freedom of others.<sup>47</sup> One of the women who had exited expressed a similar insight when I asked her where we get the strength from to seize our own freedom:

*I think the strength comes from people who love you, when you're loved,. You've got people that love and support you. When you don't have that, you don't have strength. It gives you backbone, it gives you life-force, and you don't have.... How can you have strength when you don't have that? It gives you a sense of security, it gives you roots and a strong foundation to build yourself up, and if you don't have that, you're extremely vulnerable.*

The solidarity of practitioners and charities supports the women to move towards freedom, and invites all of us to become involved. It is a kind of solidarity to listen to their voices and understand their reality; and to support the charities' work. It is an act of solidarity to review and revise our attitudes and commitments in greater awareness of the need to end social toleration of the sex trade in all its forms.

## 9 We are all connected

I learned a great deal from the women who spoke about their lives in this research and from the practitioners who worked alongside them. I saw how crucial it is that safe spaces for women exist, places in which women who have been bruised and used by men who exploit them can rest and revive themselves. I understood how we fail each other when we don't pay attention to what happens to vulnerable girls or women at risk of being sucked into the sex trade. I recognised that the struggles they described – to find their own life, to survive, to find safety and security, to act for their own good and the good of others – are those of most women. The conditions we each face are different, and the burdens we each carry, as well as the resources we find, but it still always seems obvious that we are connected to each other.

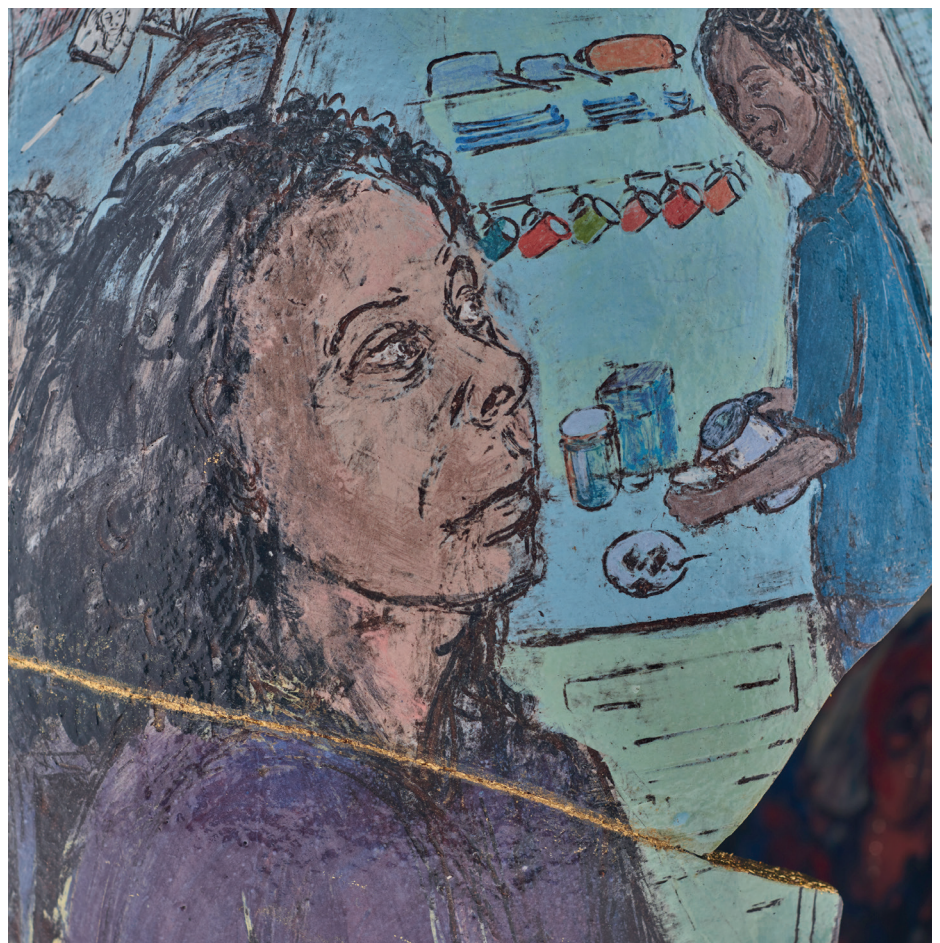
In this connectedness, when viewed from the perspective of Christian faith, there is also an imperative. As I listened to the women, and found the resonances within my own experience, I also recognised what one practitioner

47 Jennifer Erin Beste, *God and the Victim: Traumatic Intrusions on Grace, and Freedom*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) p.112.



described as the ‘overwhelmingly tragic’; the absence of flourishing for some women and the pain they carry. I found helpful here the work of Ivone Gebara, a Catholic feminist theologian who has written about women’s experiences of evil, particularly in her own context of poverty in Brazil. Gebara explores how evil operates in the ordinary domestic lives of women who are poor, and the role that gender plays in their conditions. She argues that when we use gender as a tool to see what is happening, we gain a larger understanding, exposing what has been hidden. She then goes on to discuss what salvation means for women, not just as the ultimate destiny intended by God, but in the foretastes given in daily domestic life. This must involve ‘the concrete reality of our bodies’. She continues ‘It is now that something good must happen in my life, now that my distress must be allayed, now that the pleasure of feeling loved and respected must take flesh in my flesh.’

In his homily for 1st January 2020, Pope Francis spoke about violence and exploitation women suffer and the respect and honour that should be given to women’s bodies. He proposed a principle which is relevant here, that ‘we can understand our degree of humanity by how we treat a woman’s body’.<sup>48</sup> The reality of what happens to some women’s bodies may be hidden from view for most of us, but it should not be. As this research progressed, I constantly talked to whomever I could interest in this issue, particularly in church settings. I found that people were interested, but unaware. Most had never given these concerns any serious thought. Yet when invited to learn, they saw that it mattered. The women whose bodies suffer the violence of prostitution tell us something about our society, our humanity. We need to listen.



48 Francis, [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200101\\_omelia-madredidio-pace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200101_omelia-madredidio-pace.html)

## PART THREE:

# Getting Things in Place

In this final part, I return to a wider view of prostitution and its impact on women's lives, and to what is needed in terms of change to systems and cultures. One of the complexities of listening to women's voices is that it is hard to see the structures clearly when you are still captive in prostitution, or when you are making the journey to exit or through recovery. For the women affected, the work of surviving shapes their worldview, particularly in relation to the debates about prostitution law and policy. Their voices still matter, but so do the perspectives of charities that build a wider analysis from their experience of work with thousands of women and with the structures and agencies of the state. The professional staff bring both personal insight and commitment to a reasoned position.

It is not enough to provide supportive services or safe spaces funded from voluntary sources, even though both are crucial. A coherent framework of policy and action is necessary, which involves legal change. As the voices here argue, it is equally important to change cultural attitudes and educate differently, so that girls are not vulnerable and boys understand that they have no right ever to buy sexual access to anyone's body, either female or male. Ending prostitution is not only a matter for legislation and social policy; it is a task in which we all have parts to play.

### 1 No safety and no justice

The first step is to recognise that the institutions and services through which our society guards people's safety and security do not work effectively for women affected by prostitution. Mostly people assume the police will guarantee our safety; for women in prostitution, sometimes the reverse is true. 'They don't keep you safe, they put you in danger', one woman commented. Several spoke about the impossibility of reporting violent punters and experiences of rape. Another had been scarred by the experience of reporting rape and finding herself exposed and grilled in a traumatising court case which fractured her personal relationships. The ways in which housing and homelessness services and the benefits system are meant to help people when they are particularly vulnerable also fail the women. The hostels in which they are given places do not feel safe. The women in this research who were living in hostels or had done so in the past spoke about living alongside released sex offenders and finding pimps and other kinds of predatory people operating in the hostels. Other services, whether related to housing or addiction or health, operate with thresholds and conditions which the women struggle to meet. 'There is no help', one woman said. For black and minority ethnic women, the barriers are higher and more numerous.<sup>49</sup>

The practitioners' analysis is similar. They spoke about how services often just tackle one issue, because they work in silos and fail to see the woman's whole situation. So service providers may engage with a woman in relation to addiction or homelessness, but they don't open up a conversation about prostitution and the possibilities of exit. They allow women 'to slip through the net'. Another practitioner spoke of the exhaustion of

<sup>49</sup> The specific experience of BME women trapped in prostitution in the UK is under-researched. See the Home Office report, *A Review of Effective Practice in Responding to Prostitution* (2012) [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/97778/responding-to-prostitution.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/97778/responding-to-prostitution.pdf) p.27-28 for brief comments. Other research has established that poverty rates are higher for BME women compared with white women – see Government Equalities Office, Research Findings 2010/6, *Ethnic minority women's poverty and economic well-being*. [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/85527/ethnic-women-poverty-summary.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/85527/ethnic-women-poverty-summary.pdf) The intersection of race, economic disadvantage and gender inequality needs more attention in relation to prostitution.

dealing with professionals in statutory services who should be helping, but instead do the minimum. Among the practitioners, there were some positive experiences of working with the Police in particular local contexts, but they also hear the women tell their stories of judgemental or corrupt experiences. The practitioners are utterly clear about what is needed; women-only services; immediate and flexible responses, and safe spaces to live, in the short-term, and then access to employment or worthwhile social participation. One worker commented on how involvement in prostitution ‘drops off’ when women have a place to live. The practitioners expressed more frustration than the women about these inadequacies:

*It just makes me angry, we’ve lost social housing generally, but we’ve lost women’s hostel spaces, we’ve lost safe houses, and that makes me mad, because you’re just, how the hell are women supposed to deal with this stuff, without safe spaces?*

The point here is not to make a judgement about the criminal justice and welfare systems, which face their own constraints and overloads, but to recognise how survival and exit from prostitution are not simply about the right legislation. They also involve the frameworks of understanding used in multiple services, and how the services work together and how they are resourced. Crucially, it matters that services are built on gender-sensitive approaches to women experiencing multiple disadvantage. There is progress in this field as services learn from and adopt a ‘violence against women and girls’ (VAWG) framework, but this is a broad framework in which prostitution is frequently still invisible.

The images used by the women and the practitioners to talk about survival and exit reflect the ways these structures of welfare and housing policy, and the criminal justice system, complicate and work against survival and exit. They describe how it is like trying to create a web of safety, but the filaments are fragile and easily broken. It is Munch’s figure screaming for help with no confidence that anyone will listen. It is like trying to get to the top of an escalator, but just as you get near the top, you fall back down, or you get stuck. It is like a game of snakes and ladders, trying to get access to what you need. One experienced practitioner found a new image:

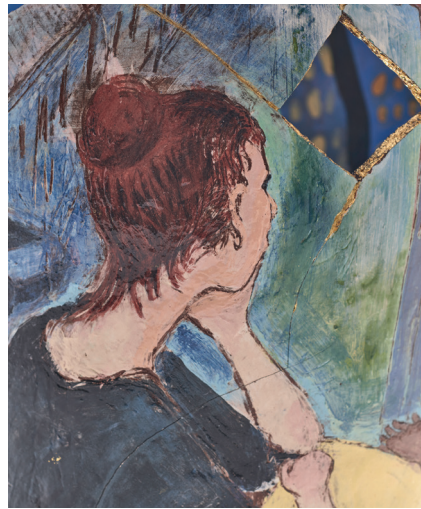
*And the other game it feels like is Bop It, there’s little things bop up, and you’ve got a hammer, and as soon as you bop one down another pops up, and it’s how many you can bop down, and it feels like we’re a living bop-it sometimes.*

## **2. The murky grey in the middle: women’s views on prostitution law and policy**

In the final part of the interviews, I asked all the participants to talk about the law on prostitution and whether they would change anything. Their responses illuminated the complexity of what is involved in ending prostitution. For the women affected, their viewpoint is from the ground level of direct experience, where they are now, or where they had been when involved in the prostitution world. Their primary concern was safety; they feared that legal change without better resources and services to support exit would make them and other women less safe. Their confidence that legal change would work was small. They did not feel that politicians listened to their voices: ‘I guess I’d get politicians to kind of listen, understand what it would *really* be like for those laws to come into place’, one woman said. All agreed that the current policy regarding criminal records arising specifically from prostitution should be changed, because the disclosure of their records holds women back when they want to find a way to exit, and even years later, may disrupt their lives by revealing their past.



The desire for safety led women in different directions on the issues of whether to criminalise buyers and/or regulate prostitution. A couple of participants felt it would not be fair to criminalise only one of the parties in the transaction. Others were more concerned that law and policy should enable women to report violent punters safely, in order to prevent violence to other women.<sup>50</sup> One woman was scrupulous in observing that the perspective is different depending on whether you have been involved in escorting, as she had, or street based prostitution. Rachel Moran's explanation of how her views changed through the process of exit illustrate the immense difference in perspective once you are free from the immediate dangers of the street. She explains when she was still involved, although she would have recognised that adopting the sex buyer law was the right thing for the government to do, she would also have worried about the impact on her life: 'I would have asked myself a lot of questions, like how would I be able to earn a living in an environment where the punters were criminalised?'<sup>51</sup>



For practitioners, the viewpoint is different. They are able to see the situation of many women who come to the charities and to build an analysis of the structures and forces that bear down on their lives. This means they live in the space in-between the larger debates and the complexity of women's lives, in what one senior worker described as 'the murky grey in the middle'. The common ground they all recognised was that prostitution is exploitative violence against women; but for some, the next step is first of all pragmatic. They seek the measures

and collaborations that will increase the safety and support available for the women they see each day, including collaboration with those whose views they may not share. A couple were cautious about the abolitionist stance, not because they don't want to end prostitution – they do – but because they fear that abolitionist law without effective and well-resourced support for exit would harm women. For others, their experience had led to a deep conviction that abolition is the necessary direction to take.

There is one other element which emerged from the women affected by prostitution and from practitioners, a realism about the limits of law and criminalisation in relation to ending prostitution. One young woman still involved expressed it succinctly;

*But I do think, getting rid of it, completely, like, no-one should have to sell sex ever again. I agree with that completely, I just don't think it's going to work right now, until we change men. And we need to make punters more visible. Like actually pick them apart, understand their psychology, because I think that's the problem. I don't think making it criminal is going to help.*

A senior practitioner made the same point:

*What has happened in our society, what has happened to these relatively normal men who want to do this? And I genuinely have no insight into that. [] Somewhere in society we've got a huge issue with that and it's not to do with the women. Just saying we're going to stop them buying isn't going to answer anything. But I do believe it does just push it underground and lead to ever more dangerous situations.*

50 A service called 'Ugly Mugs' does this, but one woman described an experience in which this didn't work and threatened to expose her identity. <https://uglymugs.org/um/>

51 *Paid For*, p.215

### 3. Men, gender and power

*There isn't a day goes by when I don't feel frustrated that nobody stopped me and nobody held the men accountable for what they did to me.*

**A survivor**

*I do believe we research the women to death. Does anybody ever talk to the men? They're invisible. They remain invisible. Their lives are not affected at all.*

**A survivor**

*I'd make them more visible. I don't know how you can teach them how to treat a woman, but with a lot of my punters, they'll be like, 'you enjoy this, don't you', and you have to lie to get the money, and you have to do things that no-one should have to do. They'll treat you like a punch bag, and you'll get paid for that. But they feel that way for a particular reason, and it's because they've convinced themselves that they're good people.*

**A young woman, still involved**

Like many other researchers in this field, I didn't interview any of the men who buy sexual access to women's bodies. This research was concerned to listen to and amplify the voices of the women. The men who buy were shadows in the women's narratives, without faces or identities, although a couple of the women stressed how ordinary they were, and one or two commented that punters included men who were successful and senior in fields of public life. One younger woman who is still involved described her distress when she discovered that a punter was a year younger than she was; 'I so wanted him to stop. I made him feel uncomfortable, because I was like, not you, not my generation too, be nice to women for goodness, sake, please.' Despite their experiences of some of the worst that men could do, the women in this research responded by speaking passionately about the need to educate boys to respect women and to understand the reciprocity of real relationships. They also spoke about the men who were important parts of their lives away from prostitution; their fathers, their sons, the young men one survivor mentored, to steer them away from trouble.

The practitioners have a more objective view of the way men control prostitution. They see that men are protected by the fiction that prostitution is just part of the consumer sex economy; that they are able to buy sexual access with very little difficulty; and how they manipulate women in so-called 'relationships'. A younger professional noted the additional layers of power men exercise in relation to black women, demanding cheaper rates and behaving in more abusive ways. Whilst their primary concern is the women they accompany, they recognised the need to engage men to think and act differently, and that men themselves must lead in this area. One experienced practitioner stressed that 'we can't do that if we vilify the men.' Pointing to insights from experience of intimate partner violence, she noted that just locking up the men involved is not a complete solution and risks forcing women into ever more dangerous situations. Working towards what another practitioner described as 'a less toxic masculinity' is in everyone's interests.

A report produced by CWASU about men buying sex in East London is invaluable here.<sup>52</sup> 'It's just like going to the supermarket' is based on listening to 137 men who had bought sex, mainly in off street premises.<sup>53</sup> The men were diverse in attitudes and circumstances, and disturbingly, the majority were between 20 and 49 years old, with the largest group (40%) aged 20-29.<sup>54</sup> One of the key points the report makes is that the men's decision-making processes about buying sex reflect 'dominant discourses of gendered

52 CWASU, London Metropolitan University, for Safe Exit at Toynbee Hall, by Maddy Coy, Miranda Horvath and Liz Kelly, *'It's just like going to the supermarket': Men buying sex in East London*. (2007). For a summary of other research, see Monica O'Connor, *The Sex Economy* (Agenda Publishing, 2019) pp. 56-60

53 *Men buying sex* p.13.

54 *Men buying sex* p.9.



sexual mores’ as well as the reality of a local sex trade market.<sup>55</sup> Strategies to reduce demand therefore need to tackle not just the market but also ‘the enduring sense of entitlement that some men have’, noting that whilst some feel shame and guilt after paying for sex, for many others, buying sex is normal, a form of ‘mainstream consumerism’.<sup>56</sup>

*You cannot legislate away the nature of the prostitution exchange, but you can legislate to get rid of the market.*

**Rachel Moran, *Paid For*, p.219**

It is instructive here to consider evidence from a Swedish government study in 2010 of the impact of the Nordic model of abolitionist law. The study found that it has resulted in ‘a marked change of attitude to the purchase of sexual services, with strong support for the law’.<sup>57</sup> Part of the purpose of the Nordic law was both to deter and to act as ‘a normative mechanism that seeks to give young men and women the message that buying a person for sexual gratification is not acceptable or harmless behaviour’.<sup>58</sup> The Swedish Government introduced the law in the context of its commitment to gender equality, recognising that the transaction of prostitution happens in the coercive conditions of inequalities of economic and other kinds of power between women and men.

It is impossible to think about prostitution without arriving at the issue of gender. The plain fact is that the majority of those who buy sex are men, and the majority of those whose bodies are bought for sexual access are women. In a valuable book exploring the connections between prostitution and gender inequality, Maddy Coy and others explore the harms of prostitution as an institution and practice of gender inequality.<sup>59</sup> Prostitution, Coy and others argue, reflects not just inequalities with our relationships with each other, but also what Raewyn Connell terms *gender orders*, the overarching structures of society, and *gender regimes*, understood as how gender operates in social institutions. Coy is careful to stress that gender intersects with race, ethnicity, class and other factors, but the common factor is that the most marginalised women are over-represented in prostitution.<sup>60</sup>

Coy’s argument helps us to see beyond the narratives and experiences of individual women or indeed buyers. Even though individual circumstances differ, we all live in a world of gender inequality. The assumption that men are entitled to buy sex, to treat women as commodities, denies women’s equality, personhood and rights. This assumption is not just a cultural structure; it is also a political choice. The Swedish government decided that it was not acceptable for male demand to require a supply of women to be available for their sexual use. When we tolerate prostitution as a society through laws that treat it only as a public nuisance and not an infringement of women’s rights and a social evil, we communicate that society accepts the assumption of male entitlement and the existence of a market in sexual access to women’s bodies.

There is one other theme in the women’s voices that is relevant here. The survivor-activist who took part in the research described the part that feminism played in her survival and exit; ‘I found feminism. It’s radical feminism that’s kept me alive.’ Another woman who was still involved spoke of how it was helpful when her key workers shared feminist ideas, which enabled her to reframe her experience, whilst another puzzled over what she described as the ‘oxymoron’ of being involved in prostitution and being

<sup>55</sup> *Men buying sex* p.25.

<sup>56</sup> *Men buying sex* p.19.

<sup>57</sup> O’Connor p.82. The law resulted in a reduction in the purchase of sex over 12 years from 13.6% to 7.9%. O’Connor also comments on the less noticed provision of significant funding to resource services for women to help them exit.

<sup>58</sup> O’Connor, p.82

<sup>59</sup> Coy (ed) *Prostitution, Harm and Gender Inequality*.

<sup>60</sup> Coy, ‘Introduction’, *Prostitution, Harm and Gender Inequality*.

a feminist. An older woman who had exited after many years who had a narrative of women as warriors described herself as a *Spare Rib* reader of old.<sup>61</sup> The practitioners also shared a feminist commitment, which each defined in their own way, and which for one senior professional involved tensions with Christian faith. I was struck by how feminist narratives help women to resist and survive prostitution and to understand and analyse all the forces which allow it to happen.<sup>62</sup>

The point here is that both women and men, and the society which we share, need an ethical and political narrative that recognises the multiple levels at which gender influences our freedoms, our worldview and our relationships. 'We should all be feminists', Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie says. To care about the well-being of *all* women requires this.

#### 4. Conclusion: So what should we do?

The women whose voices are heard in this narrative hold up a mirror to our society. Their experience brings out from the shadows some of our failures as a society in relation to women, our bodies, sex, and power. When Pope Francis proposed his principle that 'we can understand our degree of humanity by how we treat a woman's body', he was not primarily concerned about interpersonal relations but rather about violence against women and the exploitation of women's bodies for profit, including in prostitution.<sup>63</sup> The women who spoke in this research do not need to be rescued nor to be seen as victims. But they do need, as everyone else also needs, the social and economic conditions which will enable all of us to hold and act from our own freedom, for our own good. The women's experience teaches us about the real challenges of personal freedom; their situation unmasks as false any assumption that women choose prostitution, either when they first become trapped, or as they remain in its grip.

Their voices add a crucial perspective to the argument for abolitionist law. In ethical terms, it is the right direction to take, because a good society should not allow the purchase of sexual access to women's bodies. But legal reform alone is not sufficient. The crucial importance of adequate exit support for the women still involved is paramount, and must come first. It must also be planned in collaboration with the women who know best what is needed, from personal experience or from accompanying women through the path to exit. The formula is known: women-only services and relational approaches; immediate and flexible trauma informed responses; safe spaces to live; and access to real employment chances.

The broader task of changing the cultural conversation is shared by us all. We all need a society in which everyone's bodies are treated with dignity and protected from violence. We all need more dismantling of the ways power is shared unequally between women and men. We all need to understand how consent is never as simple as it seems. In the area of sexual access, it often contains a world of forces and unfreedom. We need to listen to women who have experienced the absence of conditions that everyone should be able to take for granted. We need to realise just how much that is wrong we allow our society to tolerate. And then we need to act.

<sup>61</sup> *Spare Rib* was an influential feminist magazine published from 1972-1993

<sup>62</sup> There are many versions of feminism, especially in debates about prostitution. The commitment to abolition of prostitution is usually associated with radical feminism, whereas the opposing viewpoint is often termed liberal feminism. Radical feminists and those working from a Catholic social teaching perspective find common ground in abolitionist social and political ethics.

<sup>63</sup> Francis, Homily on the Feast of Mary, Mother of God, 1st January 2020

[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco\\_20200101\\_omelia-madredidio-pace.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20200101_omelia-madredidio-pace.html)

### Survival is not an academic skill

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society's definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference- those of us who are poor, who are lesbian, who are Black, who are older, *know that survival is not an academic skill.*

It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish.

It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths.

*For the masters' tools will never dismantle the master's house.*

They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change.

Audre Lord, *Sister Outsider*, p.105 (Penguin Classics, 2019).

### The beast at my shoulder

Experiencing the aftershocks of prostitution is to experience the act of dissociation in reverse.

It is uniquely painful, mentally and emotionally.

There is an element of the overwhelming contained in the experience.

Recently I described this psychological assault to a friend, this sense of being overwhelmed.

I said that I couldn't quite put it into words for her on the spot, without taking a long pause for thinking, but that I would try to illustrate it by way of an analogy.

I told her that I imagine myself as a woman who is out hunting on the African plains.

It is pitch dark, night, and all can be seen only in its outlines against the night sky.

I am holding a hunting rifle and looking for my quarry: a medium-sized beast, shorter than me, but dangerous and strong, like a hyena or a wild boar.

I feel a presence, turn and look. Here is the beast at my shoulder.

It is an elephant.

This describes the time when the enormity of prostitution hits you and you realise there is more lost to you than is possible to process at that point.

Rachel Moran, *Paid For*, p.268

# APPENDIX

## 1 Overview of the research

Research in this area is sensitive. Women whose lives have been affected by prostitution have often experienced many kinds of scrutiny. If they have managed to exit from prostitution, they may not want to look back or re-live what happened. Speaking about traumatic experience always runs the risk of re-entering its impact. For a few survivors, speaking out and activism become necessary strategies and their voices are courageous and authoritative.<sup>64</sup> Others may not be ready to speak, either because life is just too chaotic or because naming and identifying what has happened or is happening disturbs the way they see their lives. Others may speak without a full realisation of how this may impact on them in the future.

The research on which this report is based consisted of fourteen interviews, nine with women who are or had been involved in prostitution and five with female professional staff working in three charities that provide services to women affected by prostitution. The professional staff included front line workers, service managers and senior managers, all with relevant qualifications and experience.

The crucial element which made the research possible is that all the women affected by prostitution were already engaged with one of the charities. This meant that in the interviews, I did not have to ask questions about their involvement in prostitution, as the charities' processes had already done this.<sup>65</sup> It also meant that each woman was being supported by practitioners in an organisation that provided safe spaces in which the women felt accepted and where they experienced care. This was the context in which they were invited to participate. The practitioners also ensured that the women who agreed to an interview understood what was involved; and they provided support after the interviews to ensure that the experience had not had any negative impact.

The research was given ethical approval by the University of Durham. I adopted the usual practices for qualitative research: careful explanations of the consent involved in research of this kind; use of information sheets and signed consent forms; digital recording and transcribing; and strong anonymising of identities. I was influenced in planning the research by what Julia Downes and others describe as a 'positive empowerment approach': seeing the participants as active agents with a stake in the process; and working out how best to approach consent ethics for this particular group of women.<sup>66</sup> A reference group of academics and practitioners provided advice as the research proceeded.

The participation of professional staff was significant. Their insights from years of experience of accompanying women affected by prostitution are immensely valuable. They work in a deep solidarity with the women they support, maintaining a balance and tension between their professional skills and resources and a warmth of human response. Their perspective on the women and their situation

<sup>64</sup> For example, see Space International <https://www.spaceintl.org/about/>

<sup>65</sup> Organisations working in this area usually have careful protocols to ensure that they are working with the women who most need their services and whose needs they can respond to. This is done with sensitivity and care, and even if their service cannot help a particular woman, they will refer her elsewhere.

<sup>66</sup> Julia Downes, Liz Kelly and Nicole Westmarland, 'Ethics in Violence and Abuse Research – A Positive Empowerment Approach', *Sociological Research Online* 19 (1), 2 (2014).

is balanced towards the women's good, but realistic about the challenges they face. Their voices are also heard in this report.

### The methodology

A distinguishing feature of this research was a decision to use photographs in the interviews. I prepared a set of 17 photographs, scattered them on the floor, and asked the women to choose and talk about photographs that expressed something about their lives, their freedom and their hopes for their own future.<sup>67</sup> This was important in several ways. It meant that in choosing which photographs spoke to them, and interpreting them, the women shaped what we talked about, rather than responding to a set of questions I had prepared in advance. It also meant that women could talk about feelings and experiences without needing to explain the detail of their lives. The photographs provided images such as a spider's web, a frozen statue, a crocodile gripping a turtle in its mouth, and an underground station escalator, that women could use as metaphors. They could also decide what to disclose about their involvement in prostitution or other parts of the sex trade. Lastly, and not unimportantly, it made the interviews enjoyable. Images enable conversations that are different from standard question and answer practices, conversations in which people are often less defensive. Photographs evoke memories and invite imagination. Feedback from the professional staff after the interviews suggested that women found the interviews a positive experience.

### The I poems

There are some short extracts in this report from I poems drawn from the interviews. The idea of I poems comes from the work of a psychologist, Carol Gilligan, who researched the moral development of women and girls. Gilligan developed a method of listening to women in three stages: first, you listen to the story they tell, and notice your own reactions.<sup>68</sup> Secondly, you listen to the 'I' that is speaking, how each woman reveals her 'self'. Here she recommends extracting all the statements each participant makes that begin with 'I', and arranging these in a kind of prose poem. The third stage is listening to her account of the relationships that make up her world.

The I poems let us listen to the self each woman expresses; we catch glimpses of who they are. In this research, in which I was concerned to protect the anonymity of all those who took part, the I poems are small ways of encountering the women as individuals without needing details of their identity or their specific circumstances. They also build small bridges of understanding and solidarity. Each time I read some of the I poems, I find myself thinking – yes, I have felt like that. My circumstances may be different, and the conditions I experience, but I have felt like that.

### The purpose of the project

There is a significant field of research about prostitution and its impacts on women, both in the UK and in international comparative

<sup>67</sup> I also used the photographs with the support workers, alongside other semi-structured questions. This research method is described as associative imagery, or sometimes as photo elicitation, and is well documented in other fields.

<sup>68</sup> This approach is known as voice-centred relational methodology, and has been developed further by other researchers. See Andrea Doucet and Natasha S. Mauthner, 'What Can Be Known and How? Narrated Subjects and the Listening Guide', *Qualitative Research*, 8 (2008), 399–409.



work. The academic disciplines in which prostitution is researched and debated include legal studies, philosophy, gender studies, social policy and practice, and feminist ethics. As already noted, there are also many empirical studies, commissioned by governments or other statutory bodies, or by voluntary or campaigning organisations. As one of the participants in this research said, ‘we’re researched to death, when is it going to change?’ So what justifies this research?

This project is distinctive because it has a theological and ethical perspective in view, with a particular interest in the Catholic social vision. Prostitution may be much discussed and debated in other fields, but in the field of Catholic theological ethics, it is barely mentioned. Even in the work of Catholic feminist scholars, there is very little attention to this global reality. The public voice of the Catholic Church as expressed by recent Popes has begun to place the Church alongside those who seek to end any form of violence against women but the papal statements stop short of a deeper analysis and understanding.<sup>69</sup> This research aims to draw out a fuller theological and ethical understanding of prostitution and engage faith communities and leaders within and beyond churches, as well as the faith-based voluntary sector, in a more active response.

The research has led to a series of publications. The first is a letter addressed to bishops exploring how the principles of Catholic social teaching and the Church’s understanding of its mission illuminate the vital necessity of paying attention to what is happening to women and girls in our midst. The letter urges the bishops as teachers to support an abolitionist political ethic. The second is this report. There is also an academic journal article based on the findings, and a briefing for parliamentarians on how Catholic principles have relevance in political and policy debates about prostitution.

## 2 The legal context

The UK currently has a complicated policy in relation to prostitution. In legal terms, buying or selling sex is not illegal, but some of the activities in which this happens are, including ‘loitering and soliciting’ and keeping a brothel. Both soliciting and kerb crawling are summary offences punishable by a fine, but running a brothel can result in imprisonment. Police also have the power to close brothels for up to three months. The off-street sex industry is more tolerated than on-street prostitution, probably because of its hidden nature.

There is recognition by police chiefs and others that the current regime results in an unbalanced focus on street prostitution. The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade (APPG) suggests in a 2014 report on prostitution that this is based on concern about the impact on the communities affected. It is commonly seen as a ‘nuisance crime’. The 2009 Policing and Crime Act introduced the possibility of diverting women into other interventions, rather than just arresting them, but evidence is mixed about whether these are used and what impact they have. That Act also introduced the criminal offence of buying sex from a person who has been subjected to force, fraud or coercion by a third party, as an anti-trafficking measure.

<sup>69</sup> See further reading section below for references.

The Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) describes its overall approach as follows:

The CPS focuses on the prosecution of those who force others into prostitution, exploit, abuse and harm them. Our joint approach with the police, with the support of other agencies, is to help those involved in prostitution to develop routes out.<sup>70</sup>

The CPS also recognises that ‘the context is frequently one of abuse of power, used by those that incite and control prostitution – the majority of whom are men – to control the sellers of sex – the majority of whom are women.’ In the CPS guidance, prostitution is seen as sexual exploitation, and located in policy terms within its Violence against Women and Girls (VAWG) portfolio.

However, current UK legal policy is judged by the APPG to be ‘incoherent at best and detrimental at worst’.<sup>71</sup> They continue: ‘The legal settlement around prostitution sends no clear signals to women who sell sex, men who purchase it, courts and the criminal justice system, the police or local authorities.’ The APPG recommended a more definite move in the direction of what is known as the Nordic model of legislation, in which the key elements are decriminalising those who sell access to their bodies for sex, criminalising those who buy, and supporting people who are exploited in the sex trade to exit. The aim of the Nordic model is to reduce or end demand for prostitution.

At a local level, police forces have considerable autonomy and work with local authorities and voluntary sector agencies in varying approaches to ending demand or managing its impact, such as targeting kerb-crawlers and trying to divert those who sell sex into support services. Some of these are controversial, such as the ‘managed zone’ in Leeds, in which police will not arrest in a certain area and time slot.

The international legal context offers two divergent approaches to prostitution policy and law.

- Some countries have adopted the Nordic model of legislation, so-called because it originated in Sweden and Norway.<sup>72</sup> The Nordic model, also known as the equality model, or the sex buyer law, was originally adopted as a commitment to achieving equality between men and women. The Nordic model is abolitionist; it aims to reduce and eventually end demand for prostitution by criminalising the purchase of sex, and decriminalising those who ‘sell’. Crucially, it also involves effective support to enable women to exit prostitution.
- The other legal models, usually described as decriminalisation or regulation, aim to reduce harm by either decriminalising all those involved in prostitution or by regulation which treats prostitution as a normal field of employment.<sup>73</sup> These approaches are often characterised as promoting women’s right to engage in prostitution if they choose to do so, often adopting a narrative of ‘sex worker rights’.

70 Crown Prosecution Service, *Prostitution and Exploitation of Prostitution: Legal Guidance, Sexual Offences*  
<https://www.cps.gov.uk/legal-guidance/prostitution-and-exploitation-prostitution>

71 APPG 2014 *Shifting the Burden: Inquiry to assess the operation of the current legal settlement on prostitution in England and Wales*  
<https://appgprostitution.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Shifting-the-Burden-APPG-report-2014.pdf> p.4.

72 Also adopted in Iceland, Northern Ireland, Canada, France, the Republic of Ireland and Israel. See <https://nordicmodelnow.org/> for more detail.

73 Adopted in various forms in Germany, the Netherlands, Australia, and New Zealand.

There are fierce debates about the effectiveness of each of these models, as well as continuing research to analyse their impact. As two recent reports acknowledge however, it is neither possible nor adequate to argue from evidence alone that any particular policy is right or effective.<sup>74</sup> An independent Scottish government report concludes that decision-making must be based on ‘political standpoint’ and ‘the policy context and framework in which any potential intervention is required.’<sup>75</sup> A report from the Conservative Party Human Rights Commission concludes that ‘The ethical questions must be addressed and Parliament must take a view’.<sup>76</sup>

Whilst country-based legal strategies vary, at the level of the United Nations, there is a clear orientation towards the abolition of prostitution, framed within its Protocol on trafficking. The Palermo Protocol provides an international definition of trafficking which is proposed to all member states for adoption into their own statutes.<sup>77</sup>

Whilst the UN Protocol does not absolutely require abolitionist law in relation to prostitution, it does require states to act in good faith towards the abolition of all forms of child prostitution and all forms of adult prostitution in which people are recruited, transported, harboured or received by the means of the 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 one person having control over another, for the purpose of exploiting that person’s prostitution.<sup>78</sup>

Sigma Huda, the UN Special Rapporteur, notes in her report that ‘For the most part, prostitution as actually practiced in the world usually does satisfy the elements of trafficking’.<sup>79</sup> Crucially, the Protocol also states that the consent of a victim of trafficking in persons ‘shall be irrelevant’ where any of the forces or conditions names in the definition are present.

As the Palermo definition makes clear, trafficking and prostitution cannot be separated. Trafficking names the process by which girls and women are delivered into the unwanted and exploitative sex of prostitution. It happens in our neighbourhoods, our towns and cities. It does not necessarily involve crossing of borders. But whilst the UK has set in place the Modern Slavery Act of 2015, prohibiting and criminalising trafficking in persons, it is not applied to prostitution.

#### 4 Further Reading

**A full bibliography compiled in the research is available separately. The list below gives the titles which I found most useful.**

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74 Margaret Malloch, Laura Robertson, Emma Forbes, *Evidence Assessment of the Impacts of the Criminalisation of the Purchase of Sex: A Review* (Scottish Centre for Crime and Justice Research, for the Scottish Government (2017); *The Limits of Consent: Prostitution in the United Kingdom*, Conservative Party Human Rights Commission (2019)

75 Malloch and others p.2

76 *The Limits of Consent* p.45

77 Article 3, paragraph (a) of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons defines Trafficking in Persons as ‘the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the 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. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs’. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ProtocolTraffickingInPersons.aspx>

78 Commission on Human Rights, *Integration of the Human Rights of Women and a Gender Perspective: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the human rights aspects of the victims of trafficking in persons, especially women and children* Doc E/CN.4/2006/62 (para. 41)

79 Para 42.

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## Research and reports

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