

The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill
A Submission to the Committee for Justice from
UglyMugs.ie (Safe IQ Ltd.)

1 November 2013

UglyMugs.ie is a sex worker safety scheme for Irish sex workers operated by Safe IQ Ltd, Level 3, 207 Regent Street, London, W1B 3HH, UK, contact info@uglymugs.ie.

Re: Clause 6 Paying for sexual services of a person

Our primary concern is the safety of all people selling sex. We oppose the criminalisation of the purchase of sex, as we would expect it to drive sex work further underground, further stigmatise sex workers, and create excellent conditions for crime and abuse, including trafficking, to thrive.

The so called “Swedish Model” is a failed ideological experiment that harms all those selling sex. Northern Ireland needs evidence based anti-trafficking policies not moral panic influenced ones. We hope that academically rigorous research into prostitution and sex trafficking in Northern Ireland will be carried out before any decisions are made here, as that is sorely lacking currently.

We note that Northern Ireland’s current prostitution policies put sex workers at an increased risk of crime and abuse, most notably sex workers can only work legally if they work alone, more than one sex worker working in the same premises is considered a brothel and illegal, so sex workers are forced into the vulnerable position of being lone workers.

We further note that sex workers in Northern Ireland frequently feel unable to go to police when a victim of crime. Many offenders recognise this and direct crime and abuse at sex workers because of the decreased risk of there being consequences to their offending.

A review of prostitution legislation is needed. Northern Ireland should also be looking towards Merseyside in the UK where police have defined crimes against sex workers as hate crimes, provide dedicated police sex work liaison officers and publicly send out the message that crime against sex workers will not be tolerated. Cooperation with ugly mug schemes like ours and the UKNSWP National Ugly Mug scheme should also be increased and adequate support services for sex workers should be provided.

The key features of UglyMugs.ie are:

- Free service available to all people selling sex in Ireland.
- Closed service, access is restricted to sex workers only.
- Full web-based ugly mugs scheme available 24/7 on computers and smartphones.
- Sex workers can confidentially report bad persons encountered or other dangers. Reporting is by SMS, email, phone and mainly online form.
- Each incident reported is reviewed by staff and a warning to all sex workers is then published.
- Sex workers can opt to subscribe to receive new reports by email and/or SMS alerts.

- The website features include highlighting of most recent incidents, the most serious incidents, repeat offenders, incidents by location, type of incident, lots of browse and search functionality.
- Sex workers can search for any phone number to see if there are any reports for that number.
- Private sex worker discussion forums and chat rooms where sex workers can talk with other sex workers about safety, health, legal, accommodation and other issues.
- We publish safety advice, legal information, news.
- Staff support is available 7 days a week online or by phone/email/SMS
- We provide referrals to support services.
- The service is available in 16 languages, English, Bulgarian, Czech, Chinese, French, German, Hungarian, Italian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Romanian, Russian, Spanish, Swedish and Ukrainian.
- Number check by SMS and report by-SMS service for if the sex worker is without Internet access.
- Earlier this year we launched an Android app that automatically screens incoming and outgoing calls and text messages, and alerts the sex worker if they have contact with a number that is in the UglyMugs.ie database. We currently have about 60 Irish sex workers testing this app.

UglyMugs.ie is a very successful scheme. It provides sex workers with information that greatly improves their safety. It is highly utilised by sex workers and over 4,000 incidents have been reported to us by Irish sex workers over the last 4 years. About half of reported incidents would be crimes. There are an awful lot of incidents of abusive and threatening behaviour, many robberies, assaults, and sexual assaults. We record both crimes and other types of incidents that are not crimes but sex workers define as abuse, for example undercover journalists photographing them.

Though our UglyMugs.ie work, we have built up a great deal of knowledge about crime and abuse of sex workers in Ireland, including sex trafficking into prostitution.

Given our critical role in sex worker safety in Northern Ireland and also the Republic of Ireland, we would hope to be called to give oral evidence to the committee.