



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Justice

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further  
Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill:  
International Union of Sex Workers

9 January 2014



As far as I am concerned, the Swedish model has been very problematic. The single biggest problem that you have here in Ireland is stigma. It is huge around the sex industry and is still very big. I want to tell you about a lady in Sweden called Petite Jasmine. She was an activist, like me, with the Rose Alliance, and, like me, she was a mother and by all accounts a very beautiful person. The Swedish authorities refused to believe that she could possibly enjoy her job in sex work, because they accused her of having what they call false consciousness, meaning that she had some form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They took her children from her and awarded their custody to her abusive ex-partner, who went on to stab her to death. That is the reality of the Swedish model. We all mourned for Jasmine last year when that happened.

I can remember in my time the murder of Belinda Pereira in Dublin, who suffered a terrible death with a claw hammer. She worked in the same apartment that I did. That murder should never, ever have happened. So, we should be looking at what Canada has just done, which is to decriminalise the sex industry. In Canada, women can now work together for safety, and they can go to the police and freely admit that they are working together for safety. We talked briefly earlier about some of the clients making reports on girls that they might deem as being frightened or coerced. They most certainly do. It really galls me to see my clients being painted, as they usually are in the press, as some sort of uncontrollable animals. Some of my clients have been with me for years and have become dear friends, apart from anything else. Yes, of course, they would report it if they saw a woman who was suffering. Indeed, I have done reports on their behalf on a third-party basis as well.

I also remember when the body of Sinéad Kelly was found by the canal in Dublin. That also should never have happened. If the Swedish model is introduced in any way, shape or form in the North or in the South of Ireland, the state will have blood on its hands. That is a very strong statement to make, but it happens to be entirely true.

I can say in all honesty that, in over 20 years of sex work, I have only ever felt in fear of my life once and that was when I was caught up in a bank raid.

We know that the evidence is clear. The United Nations has called for complete decriminalisation because it is aware that the further away you push sex workers, the harder it is to reach the most vulnerable. Let us be clear: there are vulnerable people in sex work. I am not going to deny that for a minute, but there are vulnerable people in many other industries as well.

We need to separate sex work and trafficking. We absolutely need to draw a distinction between the two because trafficking happens for a variety of reasons. It happens for domestic servitude, cockle-picking and all sorts of reasons, not just sex work. To be clear, I am not pro-sex industry. I am aware that my job is not suitable for many people for many different reasons. However, I am pro-individual's rights and pro-sex workers' rights. I believe — it was touched on earlier — that we should be entitled to the same labour rights as everybody else. It is only in moving towards that that we will, finally, strip down the stigma attached to sex work.

In my experience, which is vast, I know that, last year, Turn Off The Red Light was saying that something like 19 children were trafficked in 2012 to the Republic of Ireland for the sex industry. On the face of it, that sounds absolutely appalling, and as a mother I would be apoplectic with rage. The truth, however, is that it was nothing to do with prostitution. Yes, they were trafficked in, but they were used for other things entirely that were nothing to do with the sex trade. It was Minister Alan Shatter himself who released that information in December 2013 in his report. Minister Shatter, to my mind, is only too well aware of the differences between trafficking and sex work. He can see the difference, and I do not honestly believe that this law will be enacted in the Republic of Ireland, despite what other people might say.

That is all that I want to say for now. I am sure that you will have plenty of questions for me, which I will be very happy to answer.

**The Chairperson:** Thank you very much, Laura, for that. I want to establish the extent of who you claim to represent. It would be useful to know what the membership of the International Union of Sex Workers is. You have talked about your vast experience, but how many people would you purport to speak for in that union?

**Ms Lee:** I have found myself in the position — I do not know whether you would call it fortunate or unfortunate — of becoming the voice for sex workers in Ireland. That is because of stigma that I experienced myself. In that regard, you could say that I speak for the vast majority of them, because I

know, from speaking to sex workers myself, that they do not want this law brought in. They are afraid, because they know the damage that it will do.

There was one other thing that I wanted to mention. We talked about the actions of the police in Sweden. I am aware that the Swedish police will actually target sex workers who work from their home because it is easy pickings to get convictions against the buyers. They will literally sit outside a property and arrest each buyer as they come back out. The result of that is that, sometimes, the landlord will establish that he has a sex worker living in his property. Before that, he might not have had a clue because, nine times out of 10, we are very discreet and you would never know. Ultimately, the sex worker is then rendered homeless. If that is how we purport to protect vulnerable women, I am pretty much lost for words.

Somebody said that they did not want to be part of a country that says that it is OK to buy sex; I do not want to be part of a country that denies me my right to feed my family and pay my bills. That is what it comes down to. I am not a particularly stupid woman. I am working on my second degree. I am really just a perpetual student, if I am being honest. They talk about prostitution as violence against women, but I think I would recognise an act of violence being done to me over such a long time. I do not think I am alone in that assertion.

**The Chairperson:** Obviously, if you are doing your second degree, you are an intelligent woman, but I want to go back to my question. You say that you speak for the vast majority. I am trying to quantify that. Can you tell me how many sex workers you purport to speak for?

**Ms Lee:** In the UK, because it is such a clandestine industry in some regards, statistics are hard to come by, but the estimates are that there are 80,000 sex workers in the UK. That is across the broad spectrum and includes webcam strippers etc.

**The Chairperson:** Are they all members of your international union?

**Ms Lee:** No, they are not.

**The Chairperson:** So, how many members does the International Union of Sex Workers have?

**Ms Lee:** I am not entirely sure about that. I would have to look that up and come back to you.

**The Chairperson:** It is just that you said that you speak for the vast majority.

**Ms Lee:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** I am trying to establish the credibility of the organisation that you purport to represent. That is important, because, obviously, we will refer to this evidence session, and we need to know that what you have said comes from a credible organisation. So, how many members are there in the International Union of Sex Workers?

**Ms Lee:** I would need to check that out and come back to you.

**The Chairperson:** OK. How many of them are from Northern Ireland?

**Ms Lee:** Good question. I honestly do not know, but I will find out for you.

**The Chairperson:** OK. So, you do not know those answers.

In your opening remarks, you referred to a client. Do you arrange for women and clients in Northern Ireland to engage in sex? Is that part of your role?

**Ms Lee:** No. I am solely independent. I just run my own diary.

**The Chairperson:** OK. So, you are not involved in setting up appointments for clients and other women in Northern Ireland.

**Ms Lee:** No.

**The Chairperson:** But you do come here yourself.

**Ms Lee:** I do, yes. Once a month.

**Mr Wells:** Is Laura Lee your real name?

**Ms Lee:** No, it is not. It is my working name.

**Mr Wells:** It is a bit difficult to put a great degree of reliability on your evidence if we do not know your identity.

**Ms Lee:** You are welcome to my real name if you wish.

**Mr Wells:** Are you prepared to release that?

**Ms Lee:** Yes, I am. It is Antoinette Cosgrave.

**Mr Wells:** OK. Thank you for that.

Are there any pimps or those who profit from organising sexual services in your International Union of Sex Workers?

**Ms Lee:** Some of the members are managers, yes.

**Mr Wells:** So, they are pimps.

**Ms Lee:** Well, if you want to use that term, yes.

**Mr Wells:** So, it is not just a union of sex workers; it is also those who control sex workers.

**Ms Lee:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** Who make large amounts of money and control the lives of sex workers.

**Ms Lee:** I cannot comment on how much money anybody else makes.

**Mr Wells:** Would one of those be a Mr Douglas Fox?

**Ms Lee:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** Are you aware of Mr Douglas Fox's operations in the north of England?

**Ms Lee:** I am, yes.

**Mr Wells:** Are you aware that he controls one of the largest escort websites in the United Kingdom?

**Ms Lee:** I was not aware of that, no.

**Mr Wells:** He said in 'The Northern Echo' that he and his civil partner were indeed controlling a website that sells the services of prostitutes.

**Ms Lee:** OK. I was aware that Douglas's partner is involved in the management of an escort agency, but that is about as much as I knew.

**Mr Wells:** Again, following up the questions of Mr Givan, I am trying to work out exactly where you are coming from. You are from an organisation that represents the sex industry, including those, like Mr Fox, who make vast amounts of money from selling females for sexual services.

**Ms Lee:** Stepping aside from that, I speak more for myself as an Irish sex worker and from my own experiences. That is what is crucial here.

**Mr Wells:** If one of your main supporters and funders is someone who has acknowledged that he runs a website selling sexual services, selling thousands of women every year, clearly that indicates a slightly different angle on what the International Union of Sex Workers means.

**Ms Lee:** I just do not see how that could undermine my personal credibility.

**Mr Wells:** How it would undermine it, Ms Lee — Ms Cosgrave — is that, clearly, if those who support and perhaps fund your union have an incredibly high vested interest in selling the sexual services of women, you are not a union representing the ordinary woman on the street or in the flat; you are representing an organisation that makes vast amounts of money out of the sale of women.

**Ms Lee:** I do not work just with the International Union of Sex Workers; I also work with SCOT-PEP in Edinburgh. I work with a lot of people. My aim is not to protect any financial interest at all; my aim is to save lives here.

**Mr Wells:** You made the extraordinary comment that you had never met a woman who had been trafficked or coerced into the sale of sexual services.

**Ms Lee:** Yes, that is right.

**Mr Wells:** I have to say that, in all the arguments that every organisation has made against clause 6, that is the first time that anyone has said that. Yet, the PSNI, in its most recent figures, said that even it, which is not the strongest and most strident supporter of the Bill, is aware that there were 50 or 60 victims of trafficking for sexual services in Northern Ireland. Does it have that totally wrong? Is there no one out there being coerced into providing sexual services?

**Ms Lee:** No, I am not saying that for one moment. However, obviously as an independent operator, I can say that there are very few other sex workers with whom I would come into contact on a regular basis. I do not work in a brothel.

**Mr Wells:** So, you are saying that it is not that they are not out there, it is just that you have not encountered them.

**Ms Lee:** I acknowledge that there is a problem, but I do not think that it is as widespread as is being reported.

**Mr Wells:** So, do you accept that there are hundreds, if not thousands, of young women in the United Kingdom and the Irish Republic who have been brought in for the sale of sexual services, some of whom have been trafficked, some induced and some of their own free will?

**Ms Lee:** Yes, that is a fair thing to say.

**Mr Wells:** So, there is trafficking and there is coercion?

**Ms Lee:** There is, yes.

**Mr Wells:** You quite rightly pointed out the tragedy of Petite Jasmine. That is a very sad case, and we are aware of it. It happened in Sweden, and, since 1998, it is the only example of a prostitute in Sweden being killed. In Holland in the same period — of course, as you know, prostitution in Holland has been entirely legalised and is controlled — there have been 127 murders of prostitutes. Given those statistics, why would prostitutes be safer if you made it totally legal?

**Ms Lee:** Given those statistics, I can see what you mean, but, as things stand, we enjoy a very open relationship with the police. I would have no qualms whatsoever about going forward to tell the police about any concerns that I had. Were this law to go through, it would drive us further away from the police. That is my big concern.

**Mr Wells:** You say that, and there is this view that, if we introduced clause 6, we would have a situation where clients would be less likely to report examples of abuse and trafficking or, perhaps, women being held under control without their consent. Does that actually happen? Are your clients regularly contacting the police to say that they had been with a certain woman who looked distressed or looked as though she had been trafficked? Does that happen?

**Ms Lee:** Yes, it does happen, absolutely. I have seen it myself on several occasions. The other thing that you must bear in mind is that it is not just the clients but we, the sex workers, who will report things that are untoward. We are quite self-regulatory in some respects. For instance, if I got wind of an underage girl working for a particular brothel, I would report it straight away.

**Mr Wells:** Right. You say that prostitution would be driven underground if clause 6 were enacted. How would a client make contact with a prostitute if prostitution had been driven underground? How would that physically be possible? If the client can make contact with the prostitute, why would the police not be able to make the same contact?

**Ms Lee:** You find now that there are flats that are known to the police. The police know where they are and who works where; that is their job. If the law were to change, the situation would become more fluid and the women who so badly need our help would be moved an awful lot more frequently to avoid detection. That is the sad downside to it, really.

**Mr Wells:** So, you are saying that, again, although there is absolutely no evidence of it happening in Sweden, you believe that it would happen in Ireland?

**Ms Lee:** Yes, I do.

**Mr Wells:** You are answering the questions a bit more quickly than I expected. Go ahead, Chairperson, I will come back.

**The Chairperson:** You made a point that I wanted to pick up on. You made a very strong statement: you said that, if we bring this law in, we will have blood on our hands.

**Ms Lee:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** Mr Wells outlined the figures relating to the Swedish model. Compared with the situation in Holland, which has legalised prostitution, there has been one death, which was tragic, in Sweden in the past 25 years. How, then, would we have blood on our hands if we tried to bring into being what the Swedish model has achieved?

**Ms Lee:** Because I firmly believe that you are targeting the wrong — with the greatest respect, that came out completely wrong. I think that what you are doing is targeting the wrong group of people. You are targeting the buyers of what is, for the most part, consensual sex, but those you want to target are the traffickers. What I would love to see happen in the North and South of Ireland is the introduction of a charge of aggravated trafficking, so that we sent out a clear message to these people that we, as an industry, will not tolerate abuses of sex workers like that, and certainly not as a state either, but that we acknowledge that there are some people who voluntarily go into the industry and we will protect those people.

**The Chairperson:** So we would not have blood on our hands?

**Ms Lee:** Yes

**The Chairperson:** I am glad that you have clarified that. Sorry, Mr Wells.

**Mr Wells:** I am back on train. David McIlveen, who is one of our MLAs and a Policing Board member, asked the PSNI for its assessment of the scale of the issue in Northern Ireland, and in response it said that £30 million profit is made per year through prostitution in Northern Ireland. Where is that money going?

**Ms Lee:** Certainly not into my bank account. It is a lot of money.

**Mr Wells:** From your experience and that of your members, what percentage of that will go to the individual women, as opposed to the gangs and the agents who control them?

**Ms Lee:** Generally, I think the breakdown with agents tends to be one third to two thirds, but it has been so long since I worked for an agency that that may not be correct. I have been independent for years. With respect to labour, you were talking about how you cannot possibly call sex work work, but it is really. I pay my taxes and my national insurance and have done so for years.

**Mr Wells:** In a local newspaper, you stated that the International Union of Sex Workers was "largely disbanded". Was that properly quoted?

**Ms Lee:** I do not think that that is a fair quotation whatsoever. What I was trying to get at is that we are gathering strength again, certainly in the UK, because Mary Honeyball MEP is starting to look into the Swedish model there as well.

**Mr Wells:** Again, in the same article, you said that your father was very supportive of you in your career.

**Ms Lee:** Yes

**Mr Wells:** Would you suggest that a son or daughter should become involved in that career?

**Ms Lee:** I have a daughter, who is the centre of my world. I would rather that she — I will just explain if you will let me finish. I would rather that she did not get into the sex industry, because she is very soft. I have brought her up in a protective bubble, which is my fault entirely. However, I would rather that my daughter grew up in a country where sex workers were free of stigma and which did not discriminate against them. That would be my preference.

**Mr Wells:** If your daughter was to announce some day, having seen your lifestyle and the work that you have done, that she was perfectly content to go into the sex trade, would you encourage her?

**Ms Lee:** I would try to dissuade her, but, at the end of the day, I am her mother and I love her, regardless of what she does.

**Mr Wells:** You would try to dissuade her, but you regard this as just like any other job. It is a career, a profession.

**Ms Lee:** No. I did say expressly that it is not for everybody, and I am totally aware of that.

**Mr Wells:** So, like most people, you would be quite shocked if your daughter told you that she was going into this trade.

**Ms Lee:** Well, I would be quite surprised, I guess, yes.

**Mr Wells:** Yes, I think that most of us would. Thank you, Mr Chairman.

**The Chairperson:** You also had an interview in the 'News Letter' in November 2013. Let me just quote what you said:

*"Last month I opened my hotel room door, and I have got a personal attack alarm in my hand, and this guy was at my door. He was 6'4" with a shaven head and covered in the Union Jack tattoos. I thought 'Oh my God, I have had it!'."*

Do you always carry a personal alarm?

**Ms Lee:** Yes, I do, nine times out of 10. I have one in my suitcase.

**The Chairperson:** Why would you do that, if the only time that you have ever been in fear was during a bank robbery?

**Ms Lee:** It is just added protection. At the end of the day, I am a woman on my own, and it just makes sense to me to have some form of backup.

**The Chairperson:** Have you ever been subjected to an attack?

**Ms Lee:** I have never had to use the alarm, no.

**The Chairperson:** Have you ever been subjected to a physical attack from one of your clients, or have any of the sex workers that you know been subjected to physical attack?

**Ms Lee:** It happens. I, personally, have not, but, yes, it does happen. In some of the forums on the internet, you will see that warnings go up, as we, the sex workers, warn one another about problematic clients. I read about some of the attacks that happen.

**The Chairperson:** Your father also said to you that he was concerned that you would "fall foul of paramilitaries" in Northern Ireland. Why did he say that?

**Ms Lee:** He was worried for my personal safety because I have become quite an outspoken campaigner. He was worried that some people who, I suppose, would be less open to my views might take exception to what I say. He is my dad; he is going to worry.

**The Chairperson:** Why would paramilitaries be a particular concern?

**Ms Lee:** I do not know why he said that. That is a direct quotation, though.

**The Chairperson:** I thought that it was an interesting remark that he was concerned about paramilitaries.

**Ms Lee:** I do not know why they would be particularly interested in what I am doing either, but there you are.

**The Chairperson:** You also said in that interview that you would be upset if your partner or husband bought sex from an escort. Why is that?

**Ms Lee:** Gosh, I do not even remember saying that to be honest. If you have an interesting, varied and spicy relationship at home, there is no reason for them to go elsewhere, is there?

**The Chairperson:** Do you think that it is appropriate for people who are in committed relationships to go to an escort?

**Ms Lee:** When clients come to see me, they sometimes tell me that they are married and sometimes tell me that they are not. I never know if they are telling the truth or not, and, to be honest, it is not my business to ask. I take them absolutely at face value.

**Ms McCorley:** Go raibh maith agat arís, a Chathaoirligh. Thanks for the presentation. When we were in Sweden, we were told that, as a result of the law in Sweden, there had been negative impacts for people who work in the sex industry. You referred to what you think the implications of this law might be, but do you want to add anything further on what you think the effects might be on people who work in the sex industry?

**Ms Lee:** I think that it would increase stigma a hell of a lot if it is further criminalised, and that can only be a very bad thing. It will prevent sex workers from reaching out for support and help as well. I want to touch very briefly on my work with disabled individuals. I am registered with what we call the Tender Loving Care website in the UK, and a large degree of my work now is dealing with disabled guys and, indeed, terminally ill guys. That is not just something that we throw out there to try to further our cause; it is very real. I work with a lot of those people, and I feel very privileged to be able to bring that pleasure into their life for a short time.

**The Chairperson:** How would decriminalising the sex worker and criminalising the purchaser result in further stigmatisation of the sex worker?

**Ms Lee:** The number of people in the UK who already think that it is illegal is frightening. People just do not know the law, and I find that to be the case time and again when I go into interviews. If you criminalise the purchaser, you are effectively saying that the whole transaction is illegal and, therefore, it puts an onus back on the sex worker as well. It is not just the buyer who will be affected; it will be the sex worker as well.

**The Chairperson:** In our country, it is often the sex worker and not the purchaser who is prosecuted. This Bill puts the focus on the purchaser and is there to support the sex worker. It decriminalises the sex worker. Maybe I am wrong about the stigmatisation, but, when we were in Sweden and we asked the question about stigmatisation, it was the sex workers who often felt more empowered. They felt more capable of being in a position to protect themselves because they were able to go to the police about violent individuals. They were never going to face prosecution, but the person who had carried that out and had purchased the sex or whatever service from them were the ones whom the law was going to come down on. I find it difficult to understand the argument that this would further stigmatise the sex worker when, in fact, it should do the opposite.

**Ms Lee:** Canada, for example, has decriminalised it on the basis that it has acknowledged that sex worker rights are human rights and should be viewed as such in their constitution. That is a huge step forward and would lead to greater acceptance in the mind of Joe Public of the whole issue of sex work.

**The Chairperson:** Yes, but some of us do not need any research or any evidence. For some of us, the very principle of purchasing sex from a woman is sexual violence, full stop. That is a principled position, and some people do not need to have an evidence base to come to the conclusion that men are currently empowered to continue to subject that type of activity upon women. If you are in favour of equality, which I am, then this is about making sure that there is gender equality, and, in my view, there currently is no equality. Men continue to be empowered to allow their own sexual gratification to be inflicted on women.

**Ms Lee:** In terms of gender equality, I feel empowered as a woman to support myself through university, support my family, pay my bills and see my way through life. My clients treat me with the utmost respect, because I absolutely insist on it. To be flippant for a moment, as a 5-foot-9-inch dominatrix, I think that, if anyone is inflicting anything on anyone, it is on the clients.

**The Chairperson:** Address how you change the attitude of society. I had a discussion with a group of students here in Stormont, and one of the questions that I was asked was about criminalising paying for sexual services. The young fellow, who was about 15, said that it should be a woman's right if they wanted to sell their body and it should be a man's right to be able to buy their body. A girl of a similar age was aghast and disgusted and said, "My body is not for sale". She had a different opinion from that of the boy. Sadly, my experience of society is that it is often the fellows who brag about how many times they have got it from such and such. Society often looks at the promiscuous girl as a slut, whereas the man is almost held up as a hero and legend. There is a societal problem. Would this law not help to address that societal issue?

**Ms Lee:** I do not think so. I view sex workers' rights in the same way as, for example, those of homosexuals. As a society, we have come so far in recognising the rights of gay people to cohabit or adopt. I just do not see why sex workers' rights lag so far behind. Hopefully, we will catch up. It is about a societal change; you are absolutely right. It is painfully slow, but we are getting there.

**The Chairperson:** How many homosexuals have ever said to you that they believe that we should not change the law in Northern Ireland? You are equating sex workers' rights with issues around homosexuals. On what basis do you make that assertion?

**Ms Lee:** I am saying that because homosexuals as a group were discriminated against for a long time as well, and there are a lot of myths. For example, where I come from, when I was growing up, homosexuals were placed in the same category, in the minds of some people, as paedophiles. They were just thought of as strange men. It is a horrible thing to say, but it is entirely true. Now, of course, we are far more enlightened as a society, and we know that that is just not the case. That is where we are with sex workers, I think. People have a stereotypical image of what we are like, but I am not a drug addict, and I do not have a pimp. I do my job because I choose to do it and I enjoy it. It is about trying to break down that stereotype.

**The Chairperson:** What you are not saying is that all homosexuals support the rights of prostitution. You are not saying that.

**Ms Lee:** No, I was merely drawing a similarity between the two groups.

**The Chairperson:** I appreciate that.

**Mr Dickson:** Thank you for your very honest and open presentation. I want to query one area with you in relation to the union. I am aware that the International Union of Sex Workers is affiliated to the GMB trade union, which in turn is affiliated to the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU). ICTU supports the Turn Off The Red Light campaign and would probably not be particularly supportive of some of the views that you have expressed. How has the GMB dealt with that?

**Ms Lee:** The GMB, to my knowledge, now has a separate sex work branch based in London, so it has made its stance on that fairly clear. Apart from that, I am not terribly well versed on the GMB, I must be honest.

**Mr Elliott:** Thank you for that. In your written submission you make four bullet points about the Swedish model. It is very difficult to ask you if there is no evidence, because you cannot demonstrate that; only they can demonstrate the opposite. However, in the last two points you indicate that there is evidence of an increase in danger to sex workers through more dangerous forms of work and less opportunity to screen clients. Can you explain that a bit further?

**Ms Lee:** Certainly. That is primarily in relation to street sex work. Because the buyers are now deemed criminals, the sex worker has less of an opportunity to assess her client when he pulls up to the kerb. It is a split-second thing. She is just into the car and gone, whereas, before, sex workers reported that they took their time to see whether there was a smell of alcohol or to assess the guy in some way. Now it is into the car and off. In that regard, they have less protection.

**Mr Elliott:** OK, so it is mainly for street workers.

**Ms Lee:** Yes.

**Mr Anderson:** The Chair asked about the safety aspect and your carrying a personal alarm. Would you not say that you are overstating that prostitution is a safe industry when it is probably not? As the Chair touched on, if you are so sure, why do you carry the personal alarm around? I know that people are encouraged to protect themselves, but what I am trying to get at is this: are you trying to say that prostitution and the sex trade is no less safe than any other?

**Ms Lee:** It also depends on which area of the sex industry you work in. At my end of the industry, attacks are incredibly rare, thank goodness. The personal attack alarm was a gift from a client, who insisted that I bring it with me because he cares.

**Mr Anderson:** So, you agree that it is dependent on what area or sphere of this you work in and that there could be serious safety issues.

**Ms Lee:** There could be; absolutely. However, I also worked for a bank where I was hauled across the counter by my bow tie because —

**Mr Anderson:** You claim that, through this union, you represent all the workers. We are not sure what the numbers are, and we are trying to find that out. However, you say that it is different at different levels, that there are safer levels and that you work at a safer level.

**Ms Lee:** Yes, I would say that that is a fair statement.

**Mr Anderson:** Would you agree that there are serious issues regarding the safety of young women and, indeed, all women or anyone in that industry?

**Ms Lee:** I imagine that there are safety issues for young women in many industries, of course.

**Mr Anderson:** You say "many industries", but would you not say that this industry has a greater probability of being less safe than others? Are you trying to put this on the same level as another industry that could be less safe?

**Ms Lee:** No, it is not that. It really depends on what way you work. If you work in a brothel and you have other sex workers there to help keep you safe, obviously that will be safer than working on your own in a hotel room. If you are asking me whether it is an inherently dangerous industry, I would say, "No, I do not think so". Yes, attacks happen, but attacks happen all the time elsewhere.

**Mr Anderson:** Would you say that you are not portraying it as a safe industry in which to work?

**Ms Lee:** Speaking for myself, I have found it to be incredibly safe. I have never had any concerns for my personal safety.

**Mr Wells:** I have a couple of final questions. You say that you model your life on and are inspired by Cynthia Payne. Some of us remember Ms Payne. She was convicted of exploiting women in the sex trade. Why would you want to hero worship someone with such an unsavoury past?

**Ms Lee:** I would not say "hero worship"; that is a very strong term. I remember reading about her when I was younger. She ran a house of, if you like, ill repute, and you may remember the luncheon voucher parties etc that she got done for in the end. However, the one thing that struck me about her was that she was terribly matriarchal. She really cared about her clients, and she really cared about her girls. I have since met a lady who worked for her who can back that up. To me, she just came across as quite a caring individual; that is what I liked.

**Mr Wells:** This is a safe industry in which 127 women have been murdered in Holland. This is the same industry. All those women were prostitutes in legal brothels.

**Ms Lee:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** And you are saying that it is safe.

**Ms Lee:** Well, my experience has been that —

**Mr Wells:** Yet it is unsafe in Sweden, where one has died in 15 years. Do you remember the website [lovelylauralee.co.uk](http://lovelylauralee.co.uk)?

**Ms Lee:** Yes, that is my work website.

**Mr Wells:** On that website, you make frequent mention of pimps whom you know.

**Ms Lee:** Right.

**Mr Wells:** How many pimps do you know?

**Ms Lee:** Are you referring to my blog now?

**Mr Wells:** Yes.

**Ms Lee:** Oh right, OK.

**Mr Wells:** How many pimps do you know?

**Ms Lee:** Gosh, I do not know. From speaking to them online, I know quite a few people who run flats, parlours or whatnot.

**Mr Wells:** So, people who control prostitution. That is a criminal offence in the UK.

**Ms Lee:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** How many of those people have you reported to the authorities?

**Ms Lee:** In some regards, it is about women working together for safety; it is more like a cooperative. They work alternate days in a flat. Strictly speaking, under the current law, that constitutes a brothel. Even though they may never meet but work alternate days, that is a brothel. Bizarrely, both women can be convicted for pimping each other.

**Mr Wells:** I am talking about one person who reportedly earned £80,000 a month pimping women in England. Would you say that that fell into that category?

**Ms Lee:** No. That is obviously entirely different.

**Mr Wells:** Presumably, you reported him to the police.

**Ms Lee:** No.

**Mr Wells:** These are all hims rather than hers.

In your blog, you mention hes, hims and males who are controlling it. How many have you reported to the police?

**Ms Lee:** I have not reported anyone to the police.

**Mr Wells:** You have not, even though, under GB legislation, that is a criminal act.

**Ms Lee:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** That again emphasises the link between your union and those who make vast amounts from trading women for sex.

**Ms Lee:** I do not think that that is a particularly fair thing to say. I am speaking more about my own experiences as an Irish sex worker. I have very little contact with those whom you are talking about.

**Mr Wells:** You mention them frequently enough on your blog. Maybe you have not got around to reporting them to the guards or the PSNI.

**The Chairperson:** You said earlier that you feel privileged to have brought joy into the lives of people with disabilities. Do you charge them?

**Ms Lee:** Yes, but I do a discounted rate.

**The Chairperson:** You do a discounted rate.

**Ms Lee:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** Would you not rather do it for free?

**Ms Lee:** I do not know anybody who works for free.

**The Chairperson:** These are people with disabilities. If it is such a privilege and you want to bring joy into their life, why would you exploit a disabled individual and make them pay?

**Ms Lee:** It is not about exploiting anybody. They contact me, not the other way around.

**The Chairperson:** And you offer them a discount.

**Ms Lee:** Of course. In charging a fee, you also have to maintain your boundaries.

**The Chairperson:** What is the discounted rate for someone who is disabled?

**Ms Lee:** It depends. Usually it is about one third off or something like that.

**The Chairperson:** Going by the rates that you publish on your website, for one hour it is £150. Is that correct?

**Ms Lee:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** And I think that two weeks is £8,500.

**Ms Lee:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** So you would give a disabled person a third off any of those fees.

**Ms Lee:** Yes.

**The Chairperson:** So, of the £150 you would charge £100.

**Ms Lee:** It would depend on his individual circumstances, such as how long it would take me to travel to see him etc.

**The Chairperson:** So, you are charging a disabled, vulnerable person £100.

**Ms Lee:** Again, I do not target these people; they come to me because they have decided that it is something that they want to do.

**The Chairperson:** How do you find out that they are disabled? Do they need to bring a letter from their GP?

**Ms Lee:** No. They tell me expressly through e-mail correspondence.

**The Chairperson:** How do you verify that? Obviously, people will now know that you provide a third off your normal rates. How can you be sure that everyone who contacts you herein will not say that they are disabled? Are you just going to give everybody the discount?

**Ms Lee:** It is usually fairly obvious. Some of the guys I see are basically bed-bound. There is no disputing it, really.

**The Chairperson:** This is my final question. Unless any other members want to make any comments, this will complete the session.

You have obviously painted the picture that you have never been subjected to any violence and that you enjoy your work. Do you think that we should protect your right or, let us go further, that we should legalise the sex trade in Northern Ireland so that your right can be protected? Is that something that we should do, given the knowledge that we have from the PSNI that the majority of people who are trafficked into Northern Ireland are brought in for sexual slavery and that women and girls are subjected to gang rape and suffer the most intolerable sexual, physical and mental abuse? Indeed, the report by the Irish Medical Organisation's report on the health consequences for those who are involved in the industry indicates that someone who is involved in the trade is twelve times more likely to die early than someone else in society. Do you believe that your rights should override all those other issues that come with the sex industry?

**Ms Lee:** I believe that, if two consenting adults come together to have sex behind closed doors, whether or not money changes hands, the state should not intervene. Where the state should intervene is where there is harm to the buyer, the seller or anybody in between. I would never, ever advocate any form of violence or the horrible things that you spoke about, such as gang rape — of course not. However, I think that you should protect our rights as workers and that you should obviously also protect the most vulnerable.

**The Chairperson:** What if the state's most effective way to protect those who are being subjected to that type of violent physical abuse is to criminalise the purchase of sexual services? If that is the best way to protect those who suffer that type of abuse, is it not the right thing for the state to do?

**Ms Lee:** I do not believe that it is the best way to protect those who are really suffering. I believe that the best way forward is to create some form of joint committee that sex workers can get on board with and through which they can work with the police. That committee could then actively make sure that those people are working of their own volition and are quite safe.

**The Chairperson:** Laura — or Antoinette — thank you very much for taking the time to come and see us at the Committee. We appreciate the time that you have given us.

**Ms Lee:** Thank you.