



Northern Ireland  
Assembly

Committee for Justice

# OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further  
Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill:  
[UglyMugs.ie](http://UglyMugs.ie)

30 January 2014

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**Members present for all or part of the proceedings:**

Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)  
Mr Tom Elliott  
Mr William Humphrey  
Mr Patsy McGlone  
Mr Jim Wells

**Witnesses:**

Ms Lucy Smith                                      Ugly Mugs

**The Chairperson:** I welcome Lucy Smith, who is the manager of UglyMugs.ie. Like the previous sessions, this session will be recorded by Hansard and published in due course. You will have to excuse me; I am going to vacate the Chair. I hand over to the Deputy Chairman, who will conduct the remainder of the meeting.

**Ms Lucy Smith (Ugly Mugs):** I thank the Committee for inviting me here today. UglyMugs.ie is a sex worker safety scheme. The aim of the scheme is to improve the safety of sex workers and reduce crimes committed against them by bringing sex workers together to share information with each other about potential dangers. It is a free service available to all sex workers. It started out from a website Escort-Ireland.com. UglyMugs.ie was launched in 2009, although there were less-formal schemes before then. Last year, it became its own organisation, Safe IQ Limited, though it remains linked up with Escort-Ireland.com.

It works in this way: when a sex worker encounters a bad person or other danger, they report it to UglyMugs.ie. They can do that by SMS, email, phone or an online form, and we can collect over 100 unique variables about each incident and the perpetrator or perpetrators involved. Each incident reported is reviewed by us and a warning to all sex workers is then published. Sex workers can also opt to subscribe to receive new warnings by email and/or SMS alert.

Essentially, Ugly Mugs schemes are sex workers sharing information with each other to try to help each other stay safe. UglyMugs.ie utilises the latest technology, but the concept of sex workers helping each other is not new — it is probably as old as sex work itself. Indeed, in 1867, when journalist James Greenwood wrote about the Curragh wrens, a group of women who operated as prostitutes around the Curragh military camp in Kildare, one of the more interesting things that he noted was that, despite the poor conditions that the women lived in, they were well known for their generosity and kindness towards each other and for helping each other out in times of distress.

The Curragh wrens were outcasts from society, but they had their own community support network. Things are not so different today perhaps. We lack support services for sex workers in Ireland, but we have our own support networks. UglyMugs.ie is a very successful scheme because we have a great community of sex workers. It provides sex workers with information that greatly improves their safety. It enables sex workers to be incredibly aware of specific offenders and more general offending trends.

The real proof of its work is the fact that so many sex workers use it. We normally have about 800 active sex workers using UglyMugs.ie at any one time. Over 4,500 incidents have been reported to date. There have been over 60,000 discussion posts or comments on incidents. About half of reported incidents are crimes. We record both crimes and other incidents that are not crimes but that sex workers define as abuse. Examples of non-crime incidents are undercover journalists exposing escorts, malicious time wasters or suspicious happenings where no crime has been committed but there is a worry about a potential danger.

Speaking only of Northern Ireland and only of incidents that are crimes, we have recorded 171 such incidents over the past four years. That breaks down as 78 threatening or abusive communications; 62 incidents of in-person threatening or abusive behaviour; 14 incidents of assault; nine of sexual assault; 17 of robbery; six of impersonating police; three of stalking; nine of exploitation; four of blackmail; 14 of fraud, and 10 of criminal damage. Those figures do not add up to a total of 171, as some incidents involve multiple categories of crime.

With me talking about violence and sex workers, I am sure that you want me to explain why sex workers sometimes experience violence and abuse. First, it is not normal for sex workers to experience violence. Sex worker Laura Lee recently spoke to this Committee about how she has never experienced violence in her 20 years of working as a sex worker. I know that many other sex workers would say the same thing. However, not all sex workers are the same. Not all sex workers have the same experience in sex work. Some sex workers do encounter violence in the course of their work.

As a result of the work that I do, I have a much heightened awareness of violence against sex workers. Violence against sex workers is not rampant in Ireland. It is actually at quite a low level in comparison with the situation in many other countries. However, I am generally not the first to say that, because I do not feel that it is for me to be laid back. I take all violence against sex workers extremely seriously. I work extremely hard. I do everything that I possibly can to try to improve things and to try to prevent violence.

Of course, encountering violence is not a phenomenon unique to sex work. Violence can and does happen in all sorts of work settings. I could not find any Northern Irish stats on work-related violence before coming here, but I can tell you that there were an estimated 643,000 incidents of work-related violence in England and Wales in 2011-12.

Most clients are not abusive to sex workers. You can get abusive clients, but only a small minority of clients are abusive to sex workers. That is what a whole range of sex workers tell me again and again. I want to make that point, as there is a lot of dishonesty about this and demonisation of clients is not helpful. When we look at who is perpetrating violence against sex workers in Ireland, we see that it is criminals. The majority of those criminals are not clients, although many pose as clients in order to offend.

What makes sex work different from other types of work is the stigma and the laws. In Northern Ireland, most sex work is indoor work. Indoor sex work has consistently been shown to be less dangerous than outdoor sex work. However, there are key factors in Northern Ireland that are known to increase violence against sex workers. First, there is extreme stigmatisation of sex workers. I cannot stress enough how harmful that is. There is so much hatred of sex workers, and that is really damaging to sex worker safety. There is also partial criminalisation, most notably in the brothel laws that force sex workers into the vulnerable position of having to be lone workers if they want to work legally. It is also the situation here that sex workers frequently feel unable to go the police, which, many offenders recognise, means there is a decreased risk of there being consequences of their offending if they target sex workers. Some research that we conducted last year indicated that 67% of Irish sex workers do not engage with the police when they are a victim of crime. They fear being judged or not being believed by police, that the police will not help them and that, if they report a crime, they will be investigated for prostitution-related offences, will lose their accommodation or could be deported.

There is so much that we can do to prevent the violence and abuse of sex workers in Northern Ireland. There are so many positive steps that we could take — simple measures that could make a huge difference. I am not talking about new laws. To have a PSNI sex work liaison office would be hugely helpful. To stop sending out the message that sex workers can be abused and instead publicly send out the message that crime against sex workers will not be tolerated would be hugely helpful. To bring crimes against sex workers into the existing hate crime system would do so much good; that has already been done very successfully in Liverpool. It is called the Merseyside model. Northern Ireland should also support the UK Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) national Ugly Mugs scheme.

We have no independent research on indoor sex work in Ireland. There is no research in the South either. I know that there are claims of research down there, but it is all research that has either been paid for or carried out by people who are opposed to sex work. The 2009 Immigrant Council of Ireland report, which is the main report they cite, was funded by the Religious Sisters of Charity, the same order that founded the Immigrant Council of Ireland — sorry, correction, a member of that order founded the Immigrant Council of Ireland. The only two other organisations involved in the research were Ruhama, which is a joint project of the Good Shepherd Sisters and Sisters of Our Lady of Charity, and the HSE's women's health project, which is led by an extreme anti-sex work management, a woman who has said that harm reduction makes her sick to her stomach.

Sex work in Northern Ireland has changed over the past 20 years. As in many parts of the world, outdoor sex work has declined and indoor, internet-advertised sex work is now the norm. Today, most sex workers in Ireland are not Irish. Most travel to work in different cities around Ireland and often around Europe and beyond. That is another change that has occurred in the past 20 years, but I do not think it is as big a change as it is made out to be sometimes. It has long been the way that sex workers frequently move around and prefer not to work in their local area.

Historically, as far as I can tell, Northern Ireland has always had low levels of sex work. As a consequence, perhaps, there is not a lot of information available about the history of sex work in Northern Ireland. Dublin, however, had the Monto 100 years ago — reportedly the biggest red-light district in Europe until it was closed down in the 1920s. When reading about the Monto as it was 100 years ago, in historian Terry Fagan's work, one of the things I noticed was that the sex workers were reported to be primarily from rural Ireland or England, not locals. At the same time, newspapers in England were full of stories about the large number of Irish prostitutes in English cities such as Liverpool and London. The point I am trying to make is that the mobility of sex work that we see today is not actually a new thing. The opening up of the European borders, and the availability of cheap flights — Ryanair — has changed Ireland and today it is much easier, faster and cheaper to move great distances than it used to be.

One thing you see if you look at the history of prostitution in Northern Ireland is that there was a big spike in the number of prostitution-related convictions that occurred from 1908 to 1914. That was the period of the white slave trade panic. That brings me to trafficking. "Trafficking" may be a very useful term in many regards, but in the context of sex work in Ireland I struggle with it. Trafficking is presented as a big new thing, but none of its components are actually new. All of the abuses that can be part of trafficking existed before we ever used the term "trafficking". Also, it can mean so many different things. Notably here, under UK law, there is no requirement of force, coercion or deception for sex trafficking to occur. As a result, a huge range of things related to sex work can now be termed sex trafficking. I do not think that is greatly understood. I think that people imagine that the meaning of trafficking is the Palermo protocol meaning. People do not realise that none of those factors are required under the law here.

The debate on trafficking in Northern Ireland is frequently sensationalist. Despite the complexity of trafficking, people often want to reduce it to one simple paradigm, that of modern-day slavery. I think we need to get real. Trafficking could be one sex worker buying her friend who is also a sex worker an airline ticket, or giving her friend who is also a sex worker a lift. That is not evil.

Until recently, debates around sex work and sex trafficking have been framed in the absence of research. I welcome the Department of Justice's moves to address that. It is also important that the sex work community is included in the debate from now on. People talk about how one of the problems with the Swedish model is that we cannot know the impact of it because no research was conducted before it was introduced. There are people here who seem determined that Northern Ireland follows suit and that we implement the Swedish model in Northern Ireland without conducting any research, so then we do not know whether it is successful. I oppose the Swedish model because it harms people selling sex. It drives sex work further underground and creates more stigma and hate.

It increases violence and abuse towards sex workers. Ironically, it increases the exploitation of sex workers, the very thing that advocates of it here argue it would reduce.

We already have huge problems with hate in Ireland. A lot of hate has been generated in recent years, and there are consequences of that. More and more sex workers report to me things that indicate that the trafficking debate is encouraging crime — incidents like robbers telling them, "Sure, the money would go to your pimp if I did not take it" or "It is OK to sexually assault you; you are a sex worker and get raped every day anyway". Clients are not my area, but blackmailing of clients has also become an issue.

The idea that the Swedish model brings with it decriminalisation or anything good for sex workers is the biggest lie. Swedish model advocates are absent in sex worker safety. Swedish model advocates are encouraging the Irish media to expose sex workers and alleged victims of trafficking. Tabloid newspapers are repeatedly publishing covertly taken photos — sometimes showing faces; sometimes showing nudity — of alleged sex workers or sex trafficking victims, sometimes along with their name and full address. The worst offender in that regard is Eamon Dillon of the 'Sunday World'. Ruhama gave him an award for his work here. The 'Sunday World' is not the only offender here. In Northern Ireland, the 'Sunday Life' deserves a dishonourable mention, too. The media abuse has become so bad that our research now suggests that sex workers fear journalists more than they fear violent criminals.

Sex workers are regularly being prosecuted and sometimes jailed for working together. This is happening North and South. In the South of Ireland, the courts are frequently awarding the moneys found on sex workers to Ruhama. Women and men selling sex are getting criminal records and being publicly shamed. This is incompatible with the image that the Swedish model advocates portray of there being some sort of decriminalisation for sex workers. The Swedish model is all bad and no good for sex workers.

Women's Aid in Northern Ireland says that all prostitution is slavery and all prostitution is rape. Like Ruhama, Women's Aid engages with very low numbers of women — 47 victims of trafficking in the past four years, according to the evidence it gave to this Committee. It does not distinguish, of course, between sex work and sex trafficking. In its last annual report, Ruhama says that it has engaged with 63 new women. That is only a little over one a week. UglyMugs.ie works with hugely greater numbers of sex workers. Why is that? I would say that it is because UglyMugs.ie is a useful service that helps sex workers.

Anti-sex work organisations often talk about how hard it is to engage with sex workers in Ireland. I would say that the problem there is that they offer very little, if any, useful help to sex workers and they bring with that a lot of hate that naturally repels sex workers from engaging with them. Reflecting on Women's Aid's evidence here and some of the things that they said about sex workers — for example, that all sex workers have mental health issues — I think that the way in which they speak about sex workers is horrific.

Major resources are being directed at anti-trafficking efforts, and there are campaigns to include a wide range of people in those efforts, but the sex work community is being overlooked. If people are being trafficked into prostitution, the sex work community is uniquely well placed to combat that and highly motivated to want to do so. Sex workers care greatly about the well-being of other sex workers. They do not want trafficking; they want to stop trafficking. The sex work community is already doing that. Who do you think is helping the police to combat trafficking in Northern Ireland? It is the sex work community. But, while we are busy working against abuse, the anti-sex work community is running a massive hate campaign against us. We want to work against trafficking exploitation; we want sex workers to be able to conduct their work as safely as possible; we want sex workers to be able to engage with the police; but we are really struggling in the sex work community under the weight of the hate being rained down upon us by Swedish model advocates. It feels as though they just want to make it impossible for sex workers to be safe or to engage with the police or to have any support services.

I thank you especially for inviting me here today, because we in the Irish sex work community face almost total exclusion. The Irish Justice Committee's recent review of prostitution legislation was an example of that. I have to say that I am upset by the way that Laura Lee was treated by some members of this Committee and by what was said about Turn Off The Blue Light, but I thank you for hearing me.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Thank you very much for that, Lucy. I will now open up the session for questions from members.

**Mr Wells:** It is important that we establish the nature of UglyMugs.ie. I understand that your office is in London.

**Ms Smith:** I do not have an office.

**Mr Wells:** But you are based in London.

**Ms Smith:** I do not want to answer any personal questions because of the security threats.

**Mr Wells:** There are nine million people in London. I think that it will be reasonably safe for you to tell us where the office — not you, personally — is based.

**Ms Smith:** There is no office for UglyMugs.ie.

**Mr Wells:** OK, so there is no office. Who funds the work of UglyMugs.ie?

**Ms Smith:** There is no funding. We do not have things like offices; it is a website.

**Mr Wells:** You have a website, which is quite detailed. Who funds that?

**Ms Smith:** A website, as you may know, is a very cheap thing to run. At the moment, I fund the website personally.

**Mr Wells:** OK. Who is Audrey Rita Campbell?

**Ms Smith:** I am aware of who that person is, but I do not wish to answer questions about her. If you have questions for her, you should invite her in.

**Mr Wells:** Right. When you click on the link to the Ugly Mugs website, you are automatically redirected to Escort-Ireland.com. Why is that?

**Ms Smith:** As I said in my statement, it is heavily linked up with Escort Ireland. There are two ways of getting in, but one way takes you straight to Escort Ireland.

**Mr Wells:** So, an organisation that, you say, helps to protect sex industry workers and make them safer links straight to the largest prostitution ring in Ireland.

**Ms Smith:** It is straight to Escort-Ireland.com. There is one way that you can go straight to Escort-Ireland.com.

**Mr Wells:** Which is the largest prostitution ring in Ireland.

**Ms Smith:** Well, those are your words, not mine. I am confirming that it is linked to that website.

**Mr Wells:** At any given time on that site, there are 400 women advertised for sexual services. That is far and away the biggest sex ring in Ireland.

**Ms Smith:** I do not know quite what you mean by the word "ring".

**Mr Wells:** Well, they proudly boast that they can provide prostitutes from Letterkenny to Londonderry — maybe not quite like that. They have prostitutes in every county in Ireland, and at any given stage there are 400 women available for sexual services. That makes it easily the biggest prostitution ring in Ireland. Yet, when you link into your website, it sends you directly to that.

**Ms Smith:** Yes, by one way of logging in.

**Mr Wells:** So, in other words, you are directly linked to the purveyors of sexual services, no matter where you stand on that issue.

**Ms Smith:** Yes, that was the second sentence in my statement.

**Mr Wells:** So, we are actually talking to a group that is a voice for and the public face of a leading prostitution ring.

**Ms Smith:** Well, I am not the voice or the public face of that website. I acknowledge fully and would be happy to talk to you about why it is linked to that website.

**Mr Wells:** I ask that only because it is important to distinguish the fact that you are not just a group of fellow-minded sex workers who have got together to represent the best interests of your workers but a group that is inextricably linked to the largest prostitution ring in the country — the country being the Irish Republic, by the way, Mr Chairman. Do you understand where I am coming from on that? It is important that we establish the fact that you are not just a group of like-minded people who have concerns about the abuse of sex workers.

**Ms Smith:** We will remain linked to that website so long as it is legally viable to do so. The reason for that is that we want to reach as many sex workers as possible and it is the most convenient way to reach sex workers, when they are accessing their advertising. They just plug in and get straight to Ugly Mugs, where they can see the warnings while they do normal things such as paying for advertising. It is an excellent way to reach sex workers.

I am also helped out by Escort-Ireland.com staff. They help with Ugly Mugs. It is a much larger organisation than mine, and it has staff who speak different languages. I do not speak all those languages, so, when a sex worker has been attacked and she speaks only Polish, Escort-Ireland.com will help me because it has a Polish speaker. They will help me by talking to her and explaining to her the different things that we explain to people who have been attacked.

**Mr Wells:** Do you know Mr Mark McCormick?

**Ms Smith:** Again, I am not commenting on other people. If you want to bring them in, bring them in.

**Mr Wells:** Well, I will put it to you that Mark McCormick is the son of Peter McCormick, both of whom jointly run Escort-Ireland.com.

**Ms Smith:** That is something that you are saying. It is certainly not something that I am saying.

**Mr Wells:** It has been reported on RTE and in the 'Irish Independent' and 'The Irish Times'.

**Ms Smith:** I have seen this with your statistics about the 127. You seem to think that everything you read in the newspapers is true.

**Mr Wells:** Would you like me to send you the link about that?

**Ms Smith:** I believe that these things are said in the media, but I am saying that you read many things in the media that are not true.

**Mr Wells:** Both Mr Mark McCormick and Mr Peter McCormick have convictions in the Irish courts for prostitution.

**Ms Smith:** As I said, I am not going to comment on other parties.

**Mr Wells:** Until 12 August 2013, Audrey Rita Campbell was the sole owner of the domain entitled UglyMugs.ie. Is that the truth?

**Ms Smith:** Yes. Ugly Mugs started out as a bolt-on to Escort-Ireland.com.

**Mr Wells:** What is the relationship between Audrey Rita Campbell and Mr Peter McCormick?

**Ms Smith:** I do not know why you are asking me these questions, when I have told you —

**Mr Wells:** They are partners. They are long-term partners living together as man and wife. Why am I going down this route? If the owner of the domain that runs your site is the partner of the man who runs the leading organisation for prostitutes in Ireland, it draws into some doubt the neutrality of what you are telling us.

**Ms Smith:** Well, draw your doubt, but I am not going to comment on those individuals.

**Mr Wells:** We exchanged e-mails, you may recall.

**Ms Smith:** Yes.

**Mr Wells:** When I originally put the question to you about Mr Peter McCormick, you said that you had never heard of him.

**Ms Smith:** I am not going to comment on that person.

**Mr Wells:** And when I told you, you had then. The organisation that you are linked to transports 400 women a week around various parts of Ireland.

**Ms Smith:** I really do not see the point of the question. I am not going to answer questions about Escort-Ireland.com. I am happy to talk about Ugly Mugs. I am happy even to talk about sex work generally in Ireland, but I am not going to answer question about Escort-Ireland.com.

**Mr Wells:** I accept that. Let us not refer to the biggest prostitution website on professional prostitution in Ireland. As was shown on 'Prime Time' on RTÉ, 400 women are transported —

**Ms Smith:** That 'Prime Time' was a shocking programme, and I mean shockingly bad.

**Mr Wells:** It was very shocking. I found it absolutely ghastly the way those women were treated by the Romanian gangmasters. Those women are moved around towns in Ireland, because the men who buy the services of prostitutes demand fresh material every week. I find that absolutely appalling. What is Ugly Mugs doing to stop the awful treatment of sex workers in the Irish Republic?

**Ms Smith:** Would you like me to comment on the RTÉ programme?

**Mr Wells:** Yes, certainly.

**Ms Smith:** The RTÉ programme was basically sensationalised television. The man who made the RTÉ programme gave evidence to the Southern Irish Justice Committee. I was really interested when eventually someone asked him a question about the figures and where he got his numbers from and so forth. He stated that, for operational reasons, he was not going to reveal how he came to those points. What I am saying is that it is not research that we can rely on. You can only understand research if you see how someone came to the figures.

There was also huge abuse associated with that programme. What I mean is that it violated the privacy of so many sex workers. It also violated the privacy of Ugly Mugs when someone posed as a sex worker to get into Ugly Mugs. Ugly Mugs has a logging system, which logs when people have logged in. Sex workers were discussing how bad it was what RTÉ was doing to them — for a long time before the programme, it was known that RTÉ was out looking for people and trying to film them — and that person sat there and read the distress and abuse they were causing.

I cannot remember his name, but, when the guy who made the programme — Paul something — gave evidence, he said that, for the course of a year of his research, he could not find one person who could tell him that they liked sex work. Do you not find that rather stunning, considering that you have found one person already? He is claiming that he had a massive team out there for a year and could not find one person.

**Mr Wells:** What disturbed me was that, when I clicked on to UglyMugs.ie and was transferred to Escort Ireland, I was then asked to rate a series of women according to their sexual performance as if



I had bought their services as a prostitute. When you go into that column, you find that hundreds and hundreds of men have rated those women, almost like slabs of meat. I cannot go into the gory details of what they write, because there are ladies present. However, each act that they performed was rated on a scale of one to 10, and that is linked directly to a site that is meant to be protecting the interests of prostitutes in the island of Ireland. Why is that?

**Ms Smith:** As I have explained to you, we are about keeping sex workers safe. We are going to be everywhere that we can be that sex workers use and see.

**Mr Wells:** Do you think that it helps sex workers that men are invited to go onto a website to rate their performance, basically as playthings or slabs of meat that you can abuse as you wish in return for payment? Does that provide the protection that Ugly Mugs is trying to create for its members?

**Ms Smith:** My view on reviews generally is that they are a mixed thing. Some sex workers like reviews; they say that it gets them a lot of business and is great. Other sex workers do not like reviews. There are definitely some issues, as some sex workers do not like the reviews concept. A lot of websites allow sex workers to choose whether they receive reviews or not. I would certainly say that that should be a choice. People should not leave reviews —

**Mr Wells:** None of the prostitutes on Escort-Ireland.com has any choice. They are all rated.

**Ms Smith:** As I said, I am not going to comment about that website.

**Mr Wells:** At the minute, I cannot get onto your website because I am immediately diverted to Escort-Ireland.com.

**Ms Smith:** You are on the front end of the website. You are not on the back end. I do not know how many times you would like me to acknowledge that UglyMugs.ie links to Escort-Ireland.com.

**Mr Wells:** I appreciate your honesty. It is very helpful. It is more forthcoming than I expected and certainly much more forthcoming than when we exchanged emails.

If that is the case, how does it protect the interests of your members, who are members of Ugly Mugs, if they are portrayed unclothed and in extremely provocative positions on that site and men are asked to rate them according to their sexual performance?

**Ms Smith:** As far as I know, Irish sex workers are not reporting any problems with review sites, because all of the Irish sites, as far as I know, allow sex workers to choose whether they receive reviews. So, if people do not want reviews, they simply say that they do not want reviews and people cannot leave reviews of them.

**Mr Wells:** You have no conscience at all about the fact that men are asked to review, sometimes in the most derogatory and insulting terms, the performance of those women?

**Ms Smith:** On the whole morality of sex work thing, I do not have a lot of views. I really do not.

**Mr Wells:** You do not have any view on that. So, I have a right to buy the sexual services of any woman I choose?

**Ms Smith:** Of course you do not have the right to buy any woman you choose. That is ridiculous. I am saying that on the matter of consensual sex between adults and money being exchanged, I do not have a strong moral position. If you want to say that you hate it, fine.

**Mr Wells:** So, no matter how vulnerable a woman is; how much she is perhaps addicted to drugs, solvents or alcohol; how clearly she is maybe of limited intelligence or has come from an extremely poor background and has had a very difficult upbringing, I have a right, if she consents, to buy her for whatever sexual service I deem appropriate?

**Ms Smith:** That is not how sex work works. You have just said, "whatever sexual service I deem appropriate". You are talking about it in terms that make it sound as though the person is not choosing to sell you sex at all. Obviously in those circumstances —

**Mr Wells:** Well, on the leading website, Escort-Ireland.com, there is a list of the sexual services that every woman is required to perform.

**Ms Smith:** Again, you are using the word "required". It is a bizarre term. People think that everyone uses the word "escort" for some legal reason or because they are trying to create the pretence that it is all about dinner dates, or something. Personally, I like the word "escort" because I like the time and companionship concept. That is what it should be. I do not mean that sex should not take place. Certainly, all clients should understand that when you make a booking with a sex worker, you are paying only for her time and companionship. If there is anything that she or he does not want to do, you are not doing it.

**Mr Wells:** How much companionship can you engender if the rate is for 35 minutes and that woman is changed every week as another squad of ladies is brought from another part of Ireland to fulfil the sexual desires of the same men? How do you develop companionship with a woman?

**Ms Smith:** I was talking about companionship as the concept of what they are paying for. They do not pay for the sexual act. I agree with that concept. I think that it is a good one.

**Mr Wells:** In Rachel Moran's book — I hope that you have read it, because it is a horrendous read — she does not seem to have had any experience of the need for companionship. It seems to have been a demand for raw sexual services as quickly as possible.

**Ms Smith:** When I was talking about companionship, I meant that not all sex work involves sex. Some people do just want companionship or other services. I was not trying to make out that sex does not occur. I was saying that the structure in which it occurs is one in which the woman retains her consent. You cannot just do what you want with a sex worker. That is a nasty thing to say, and it is not true.

**Mr Wells:** Having seen the list —

**Ms Smith:** When you pay a sex worker, you are paying for her time and companionship. If she does not want to do something with you, she will not do it.

**Mr Wells:** Having seen the list that is attached to each lady, there is very little that you cannot do, I have to say. There are certainly things there that I and, I am sure, other people in this room do not understand. It is very all-encompassing.

The leading sex website in Ireland has a monthly income of €150,000. How much of that goes to your members as opposed to the persons — the father and son — who run it?

**Ms Smith:** What do you mean by "members"?

**Mr Wells:** I mean the members of Ugly Mugs. How much of that gets down to the actual prostitutes as opposed to those who control them?

**Ms Smith:** I have absolutely no idea.

**Mr Wells:** If you are seen as representing the genuine needs of sex workers, should you not try to find out how much of the pie they get?

**Ms Smith:** I said that I am not going to comment on this website, but you are saying that a website is making money and asking how much of that money is going to the sex workers. I would have thought that the answer is none, because it is an advertising website, and the sex workers are paying it for advertising.

**Mr Wells:** Yes, but the organisation is also setting up meetings with prostitutes, and then that money comes back to the organisation.

**Ms Smith:** Right, you really need to get that organisation in and elaborate on that.

**Mr Wells:** I think that I have that organisation in now.

**Ms Smith:** Do you?

**Mr Wells:** I do. That is why I am being particularly difficult. I hope that you do not regard me as being rude, but, really, I believe that we have the front person here for the largest escort website in Ireland.

**Ms Smith:** You are entitled to your opinion, Mr Wells.

**Mr Wells:** Yes, and I realise that you have been speaking from a prepared text. Certainly, had your view been that of a hard-pressed sex worker, some of whom are having a wretched time —

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I think that, in fairness, all witnesses come with a prepared text.

**Mr Wells:** Yes, that is a fair point. The vast amount of the information that I have about your organisation, you personally and Escort-Ireland.com all point to the one thing, which is that you are a spokesman for Escort Ireland, the largest prostitution website in Ireland. I put that to you.

**Ms Smith:** I am saying that that is not true. You can hold your opinion.

**Mr Wells:** You have not told us who is paying you and who is paying for your website.

**Ms Smith:** I have told you that the Ugly Mugs website is very low cost and that I am paying for it personally.

**Mr Wells:** So, who paid for you to fly over to Belfast?

**Ms Smith:** I paid for myself.

**Mr Wells:** So, all of this, you are paying for yourself. You are not being paid by any outside organisation.

**Ms Smith:** I, as an individual, do other jobs because my Ugly Mugs work is not paid. I am not paid in relation to this work.

**Mr Wells:** You do not have to answer this question: have you any direct connection with the sex industry?

**Ms Smith:** I cannot answer that question because I do not really know what you mean by it.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** In fairness to Lucy, she has said that she is here on behalf of Ugly Mugs. She has said that three or four times, and I think that you have made your point.

**Mr Wells:** I am happy enough, Mr Chair.

**Mr Elliott:** Thanks for the presentation. You have said in your written submission that a review of the prostitution legislation is required and that Northern Ireland should be looking towards Merseyside in the UK. You may have heard the academics talking about Manchester.

**Ms Smith:** Yes.

**Mr Elliott:** Where do you see the difference between what is provided in Merseyside and Manchester and, indeed, Northern Ireland?

**Ms Smith:** Merseyside and Manchester are next to each other, and I think that they probably have quite a lot in common. Manchester does not have the Merseyside model, so to speak, where crimes against sex workers are treated as a hate crime. I can answer very clearly in the case of Northern Ireland. I would like that model here because I speak to sex workers every day, and I want sex workers to feel able to go to the police. So, when someone is being abused, whether it is exploitation-type abuse, which Mr Wells likes to focus on, or whether they have been robbed by a criminal gang or whatever it is, I want those people to be able to go to the police and get help. Right now, the vast majority will not, because they fear the consequences for them if they do.

If we were to put crimes against sex workers into the hate-crime model, a number of things would happen. First, there would be a police liaison officer, which would mean that sex workers would not have to face going into a police station, walking up to the counter and saying, "I am a sex worker". That is a very intimidating thing to have to do. They would be able to ring an officer who was trained in this and understood it, and that would make it a lot easier for them to make that move and contact the police. It would also mean that offences against sex workers would start being recorded, which, currently, they are not, by and large, because they are not being reported. So, we would then have statistics, and we would know how often sex workers are being abused and what type of abuse is happening. There would be reviews. At the moment, people are just not considering sex work safety. It is not on the radar. If we were to put it in that system, we would give sex workers the ability to start having their safety taken seriously.

**Mr Elliott:** In your experience and in your work, do you find prostitutes who have been trafficked coming to your organisation for help? If you do, what proportion of the number who come to you have been trafficked compared with those who, in my words, are prostitutes by choice?

**Ms Smith:** Most sex workers identify as independent. That is certainly what they say to me. I believe them; I am not saying that that is just what they say to me. According to our research, about a third of sex workers have, at some point, worked for somebody else or have had some third-party involvement. I know a number of sex workers who, under the Northern Irish definition, technically could be trafficked. A lot of sex workers come from countries such as Romania, and they come with something like an agency arrangement. They choose to come, they want to come, and some of them are very happy. However, they could certainly fall into the definition of "trafficked". So, under this very wide UK definition, where there is no requirement to have been forced under law, I would say that the numbers that are trafficked are, by that definition, quite significant. People having been forced or coerced is rarer, although I have come in contact with it. It does happen, but it is not as usual.

**Mr Elliott:** In your role, do you get requests from prostitutes who are trying to move out of that system to maybe lead a different life? If so, how many of those people come from other countries, and how many look to be integrated into local society?

**Ms Smith:** I do not think that people come to me about that so much, because I focus more on the violence and crime side of things. Sex workers certainly talk among one another, and some want to exit. That is a very valid thing. Not everyone's experience of sex work is good. I know many, many sex workers who do not want to be in sex work. They would like to do something else; they would like a better option. So, exiting services are definitely needed, and it would be great if, among other services, there were exiting services so that anyone in sex work who does not want to be there has the opportunity to leave. Sex work is not for everyone. For some people, it is a great job, but for others it is not.

**Mr Humphrey:** Thank you very much for your evidence. I do not know whether you were in the room at the time, but where on protection of sex workers, particularly those who are coerced, I put this question to the witnesses from Queen's University: do you believe that this law is sufficiently robust to protect sex workers who are being coerced?

**Ms Smith:** Yes, but I want these services put in place. I want the end of abuse do newspaper could do exposures of hate, and I also want the provision of police who are friendly and easy to contact. The lack of those services means that people who are being trafficked are being failed. So, I think that people who are being exploited are being failed by our systems. However, I do not think specifically that it is the law that is not strong enough; I think that the problem is that we do not have support services and that we are driving it underground. We are making prostitutes afraid to talk to or engage with people.

**Mr Humphrey:** I am not trying to trip you up here, but can I ask you this: if the law is not strong enough, do you believe that it will be sporadic across the country, depending on the resources and attitude of the local police service?

**Ms Smith:** I would go against the local police service concept. With local police, what we see again and again is that sometimes you will get a great response and at others you will get a poor response. So, it is inconsistent. I think that a specific office needs to be set up in the PSNI that deals with the abuse of sex workers, trafficking and so forth. I would not suggest that anyone experiencing problems contacts the local police; I suggest that they contact a direct office, which would then deal with it. I

think that that would be better than having the local police involved. Response should not vary over the country, and everyone should be able to go to the one service. In a country such as Northern Ireland, which is quite a small jurisdiction, I think that that is very possible. It is not as though we are talking about a much bigger country such as the US, where you could not have something nationwide.

**Mr Humphrey:** What we have, however, is a land border with another nation state, which means that abuse can obviously take place very easily between the jurisdictions. Indeed, that is why the Committee went to the Irish Republic. Every political party in the Irish Republic seems to take the view that something has to be done. We are concerned that Northern Ireland will become some sort of soft underbelly in human trafficking and the abuse of people and in the most basic human rights. I am genuinely concerned about that.

In answer to Mr Wells, you said that men cannot buy sexual services.

**Ms Smith:** I said that I like the word escort, because I like the concept of time and companionship, and the men who visit an escort are not paying for the actual service.

**Mr Humphrey:** What is the difference between a man buying and, to repeat the term that you used, "a woman selling" her services?

**Ms Smith:** Sorry, a woman selling sexual services.

**Mr Humphrey:** Yes. What is the difference?

**Ms Smith:** Between a man buying sexual services or —

**Mr Humphrey:** The term "a man buying sexual services" is something that you are opposed to, and you were not content when Mr Wells used that term, but you did state that women could sell services. So, what is the difference?

**Ms Smith:** I am just saying that those women or men have the choice. We are talking in male/female terms, which is a little bit strange, because we have a lot of transwomen sex workers in Ireland. We have a lot of male sex workers, too, but, if you want to talk in these terms for this purpose, it is fine. We will forget about that.

I am saying that the person who is selling the sex should always have the choice. They should be able to choose yes or no.

**Mr Humphrey:** I appreciate that, in your view, some of the people whom you have knowledge of, represent or have been a spokesperson for will not be of that view. However, I make the point again that it is our job as legislators to protect the most vulnerable people.

**Ms Smith:** Yes.

**Mr Humphrey:** With all due respect, I do not believe that the law that is there to protect those people is doing that. This problem is underground — it will not be driven underground, because it is underground already. We have to do all that we can to protect the most vulnerable people in society, including the young lady whom Pamela from the Irish Congress of Trade Unions talked about. She was from India and had no identity. We must also protect young ladies who are trafficked from China who have no identity, because, if they are a second-born child, they are not registered in their state. That is because it is against the law to have a second child and they have no rights at all given that, technically, they do not exist and, therefore, have no identity.

I know that I am making extreme points and using extreme examples, but I am saying that laws have to be there to protect the most vulnerable people, and that is all that we are trying to do. Do you appreciate that?

**Ms Smith:** I agree with a lot of what you said. A lot of what you said is the same thing that I want. I serve people who choose to sell sex and trafficking victims equally. I want all those people to have the best service. I want people who are being abused to be able to get help, and I am saying that the only thing that we seem to disagree about — we both want these people to be safe and not to be abused — is that you are saying that this law will do that, and I am saying that, in my experience, it will

not do that. It will actually drive it further underground, and it would help if we could try to get rid of the stigma and allow these people to access services. In my opinion, that would provide better help. We want the same thing, but —

**Mr Humphrey:** The difference is that I am not convinced that the law is doing what you believe it is doing, either in Northern Ireland or, I suspect, across the European Union, given the evidence that we heard during our visits to Stockholm and to the Irish Parliament in Dublin last week. Now, all that having been said, there are particular circumstances here. I believe that it is underground.

**Ms Smith:** I agree that it is underground to an extent.

**Mr Humphrey:** So, that means, in my view, that the law is not working. It is not protecting people. Another particular problem that we have in Northern Ireland are the paramilitary organisations, which have been linked to prostitution.

**Ms Smith:** I have to say that I really have not come across any paramilitary links. I have seen that written down, but I really have not come across those links. Sex workers are sometimes attacked or robbed, with men turning up saying, "We are the IRA", and that sort of thing. We also have men who turn up and say, "We are the PSNI". A lot of people say this or that, but I have not seen any solid evidence of paramilitaries from either side being involved in sex work in Northern Ireland. So, I cannot concur with that statement.

**Mr Humphrey:** I picked up a number of times that you are opposed to the Swedish model. Why?

**Ms Smith:** That is because, right now, I struggle to get sex workers to go to the police when they experience problems. They do not want to go to the police. They are fearful of the police. It is maybe not so much that they are fearful of the police but that they are fearful of being exposed as sex workers if they go to the police. If we have the Swedish model, it will be harder and harder to get people to engage with the police. I think that people have to be able to engage with the police to combat abuse. If we want to combat the serious criminality that you are talking about, we need people to be prepared to go to the police and to talk about what is going on. If I am struggling to get people to do that now, I do not know what will happen if things become even more difficult and if even fewer people are prepared to go to the police.

I do not mean that as a criticism of the police. In my experience, the PSNI are actually quite good, and I have had more positive than negative feedback from sex workers about them. A lot of sex workers go to the police when they have a problem and they receive a good service. However, equally and for a variety of reasons, there are many sex workers who will not go to the police at all, no matter what happens.

I also fear that, if we have a situation where clients are criminalised, as an obvious consequence, those clients will not be prepared to go to the police. Sex workers will also have to move around more, as they will be fearful of things such as losing their apartments and so forth. So, I think that we will have many fewer people who are prepared to engage with the police. The worst approach to dealing with serious criminality is to take away the options. I want to give people more opportunities to go to the police.

**Mr Humphrey:** Surely decriminalising it will help them.

**Ms Smith:** It will help who?

**Mr Humphrey:** The prostitutes.

**Ms Smith:** What decriminalisation are you offering in the Bill?

**Mr Humphrey:** In the Swedish model, the emphasis has switched to the clients.

**Ms Smith:** I think that that is actually a lie, as the Swedish model does not offer any decriminalisation. You are not offering any decriminalisation in your Bill.

**Mr Wells:** We are. We offer it in clause 8.

**Ms Smith:** Clause 8 offers immunity to people who have been trafficked or forced. What decriminalisation are you offering? Sorry, maybe I have misunderstood.

**Mr Wells:** The proposal is that the person who buys the sex will be the criminal, not the person who sells it. Therefore, that puts that woman —

**Ms Smith:** That is more criminalisation for the client. I asked what less criminalisation you are offering for sex workers.

**Mr Wells:** The woman would not be prosecuted. The man would be prosecuted.

**Ms Smith:** The woman is not currently prosecuted in an indoor setting, although she could be prosecuted if she was working with another woman, as that would be brothel keeping. So, I still fail to see what decriminalisation you are offering.

**Mr Wells:** If there were several women in a room, there would be no prosecution.

**Ms Smith:** If there were two women, that would be a brothel under the law.

**Mr Wells:** That is the Swedish model.

**Ms Smith:** No, the Swedish model — I am asking you where the decriminalisation is. I can look at the Bill and say that maybe we are getting the Swedish model. What a shame it is that we will not get anything good if we get the Swedish model. What a shame it is that the idea of decriminalisation is empty. You are not giving anything to sex workers.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** OK. Thank you. In those who you represent, do you see a difference between what some call off-street and on-street prostitution?

**Ms Smith:** I work only with indoor sex workers. Ugly Mugs is open to anyone, including outdoor sex workers, but we do not have any outdoor sex workers registered to use for service. I am knowledgeable really only about indoor sex workers, not outdoor sex workers. I do not have the experience.

You used the word "represent". However, the sex work community can speak for itself, and individual sex workers can speak for themselves. I do not see myself as a representative who speaks on behalf of sex workers. I speak on behalf of Ugly Mugs and the work that I do, but I do not claim to represent the views of every sex worker in the country.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** When I said "represent" I meant broadly, rather than —

**Ms Smith:** Yes. I just wanted to be clear that I had not been voted by —

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Is there any particular reason why your organisation does not include what are called on-street workers?

**Ms Smith:** Do you mean why uglymugs.ie does not?

**Mr McCartney:** Yes.

**Ms Smith:** It does include them, and we would love to include them. However, the reality is that outdoor sex workers are not registering and using the service. Our service is a web service and is based on phone numbers and email addresses. I am not saying that we do not have any outdoor sex workers, but a significant number have not registered to use the service. They are welcome to do so, but we have not had that experience.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** In your opening statement, you mentioned that, in the North, Ugly Mugs reported 171 incidents. What was the follow-up in convictions?

**Ms Smith:** The number will be very low, because a very low number report to the police. So, you are then looking at very low conviction rates for that.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I think that I picked you up saying that there were 14 assaults. Were there convictions for those? What is the process when you report an incident to the PSNI?

**Ms Smith:** I do not report it to the PSNI unless the sex worker wants it reported to the PSNI.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Were those 14 incidents reported?

**Ms Smith:** Most of them are not reported, no.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** So, they are not logged independently.

**Ms Smith:** No. The UK national Ugly Mugs scheme has a direct option to feed the intelligence into police databases. So, when you make a report to the national Ugly Mugs in the UK — it is the only place in the world where this is happening — the sex worker ticks a box automatically, and, if the sex worker agrees that the information can go to the police, it is automatically sent. It then goes into a police database that, for intelligence purposes, looks at serial and violent offenders. It also goes through the north-west regional hub, which acts as an intelligence hub and distributes the intelligence to officers in different regions. We do not have that facility. I can report it to the police only on an individual basis, because we do not have a direct link. We would be happy to have a direct link, but we do not.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** Is there any time when the policing authorities from anywhere contact you and say that there have been a high number of assaults and that we need to do more?

**Ms Smith:** Yes. If someone is assaulted and goes to the police, the police might contact us and ask whether we have any information about it, because perhaps the offender has targeted multiple sex workers. So, yes, there are times when the police express concern about the safety of sex workers and make enquiries because they believe that something dangerous might be going on.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** I have one final question. The text that was supplied to the Committee before you came to give your evidence mentions clause 6 and states:

*"We oppose the criminalisation of the purchase of sex, as we would expect it to drive sex work further underground".*

On what basis do you make that contention?

**Ms Smith:** I make it on the basis that it is quite underground currently. I think that it was Ruhama that said in its evidence session that clients can send an anonymous e-mail and can still report things to the police. I have a huge amount of experience of dealing with crimes against sex workers, and, in my experience, anonymous e-mails do not really help matters. In fact, a lot of loonies send anonymous e-mails. We really need people to be prepared to engage with police, and, if we get to the point where people will only send anonymous e-mails, we will have very poor intelligence. If we want people to engage with the police, we do not want them to be criminalised, because that discourages engagement with police. So, you are looking at less engagement with the police if you bring in more criminalisation. If you criminalise the clients, the knock-on effect is that it will drive sex work further underground.

**The Deputy Chairperson:** That is the end of my questions. No other members have indicated that they want to ask a question. So, I thank you on behalf of the Committee for coming here today and giving your testimony.