



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for Justice

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further
Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill:
Ms Mia De Faoite

6 February 2014

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Mr Paul Givan (Chairperson)
Mr Raymond McCartney (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Stewart Dickson
Mr Tom Elliott
Mr William Humphrey
Mr Seán Lynch
Mr Alban Maginness
Ms Rosaleen McCorley

Witnesses:

Ms Mia de Faoite

The Chairperson: I welcome Ms Mia de Faoite. I will allow you, Mia, to correct my pronunciation when you come to the table. This session will be recorded and published in due course. I will hand over to you to make an opening statement, after which, I am sure, members will have questions. We appreciate that you have taken the time to speak to us today.

Ms Mia de Faoite: Thank you for the opportunity. My name is Mia de Faoite, and I am a survivor of prostitution and drug addiction. I am an activist in my own right and one of the many partners who make up the Turn Off The Red Light campaign. I have given public lectures on the issue and have used the avenues of the media to highlight the harms and dangers intrinsic in prostitution and the reasons why the recommendations made by our own Justice Committee now need to be implemented. I am a second-year student at the National University of Ireland at Maynooth, where I am reading philosophy and sociology. I am also the mother of one daughter, and I have two beautiful granddaughters, whom I adore.

My decision to enter prostitution seemed to me at the time quite a rational one. I had developed a heroin problem at the age of 33, having never taken a drug in my life before, and my partner had an even bigger drug problem. My money was gone and crime was not an option, but I knew that I had a valuable commodity because I had a female body that I could sell. It would not be for long; just until they were sorted and I was sorted. However, I made that decision while addicted to a mind-altering substance, and you do not make good decisions while you are trapped in addiction. I entered a paradox from which very few women escape. I am one of the lucky few.

Life on the street is complex. We led difficult and complex lives, and I would never be able to explain them in this short time. However, there are two issues that I would like to address today. The first is rape. Rape becomes part of the job, so much so that we do not really use the term "rape"; we do not

have permission to. We might allude to it, but then it is ignored and the subject is changed. Many people become desensitised to the pain of others because, if you acknowledge someone else's pain, you may just have to acknowledge your own. We do not have anywhere to place that pain or deal with it, so some people bury it, some use substances to forget it and some disconnect from it. Unfortunately, some accept it as routine.

Every prostituted woman has a rape or sexual assault CV, and here is mine. It was December, it was freezing cold and we were out more than usual as it was close to Christmas. I got an offer of a job with a friend of mine named Jenny; it was for a Christmas party. She said that there would be only a few men, she knew one of them well and we would be fine. I was a little naive, as I had been on the Burlington Road for only five months and the thought of getting one large sum of money meant that I would not have to come out again until after Christmas, so I went.

It turned out that there were eight men in total. I was nervous now, but we agreed the terms — what was allowed and what was not etc — we were paid in full and we got on with it. Alcohol and cocaine were offered. I took cocaine, but I had no alcohol, so you can imagine what went on. Not all the men wanted something from us, and I did feel somewhat in control, but I was aware that Jenny was getting drunk, as were the men, who were getting loud. When the time was up, we were left alone for a minute. I collected my things and told Jenny to get ready to leave.

I went into the other room and said, "Right guys, we are going to go, thanks" or words to that effect. I could feel that something had changed in the atmosphere, and the hairs on the back of my neck began to stand up. One of the men said, "You are not going anywhere; we are not finished". I tried to reason by saying, "Come on, fair's fair", but I looked at the door and glanced in at the bedroom where Jenny was still not ready. I could not just run and leave her. The next thing, my hair was pulled and I was pushed over the sofa. Then it began.

I was dragged back into the bedroom where Jenny and I were subjected to an unimaginable horror. We were raped, mostly anally and orally. We were like rag dolls — not even that. We were just objects to be passed round. My skin was crawling, and my insides felt as if they would come right up my throat. I wanted to scream, but I could not. I looked at Jenny, but I could not protect her. She was much younger than me, much thinner and weaker. I looked straight into the eyes of the man who was on top of me. I thought, "Can't you see me? Can't you see my tears?". I will never forget the eyes that looked back at me, for they were blank. He looked straight through me. They tried to insert objects inside us. Jenny was placed on a chair. I am sorry that I cannot speak about what happened next, but eventually it ended and they left. Thankfully, they did not take the money back, so we could get out of there. I picked Jenny up, half-dressed her myself and we left. I left that building with a bruised body and face, smelling of urine and bleeding from my rectum.

Do you now understand how I could not see the choices any more? I have not seen the world the same way since that night. As for my friend Jenny, she died. Her drug use spiralled out of control, and she died alone of an overdose about three months later. It might have been heroin in her arm on the day she died, but I know what really killed her. Today, I am her voice also.

My next rape was a year or so later by a lone offender off the Burlington Road. The next — I am not sure if I can call it rape — happened the same night. I was sitting on the ground on the street after the attack. My money and my phone had been taken, and I was sitting, disorientated and alone, with an aching body and a struggling mind. A regular of mine pulled up, got out of his car, picked me up and offered to drive me home. I told him what had happened, and he stopped and bought me a coffee. However, just before we reached my home he pulled in and reminded me that I had no money to pay him — he was a taxi driver — but that I could sort him out. I did not even argue; I just leaned back and let him. What do you call it when someone has sex with a woman who, they know, was raped an hour or so beforehand?

My last rape was by two young men who were high on cocaine. One watched while the other did it, but to me he was just as guilty. I have countless accounts of humiliations — I have been urinated on etc — and of oral rape. In fact, I have no gag reflex; the muscles in the back of your throat learn to relax because they have to.

I am devoid of sympathy for buyers, as they messed around with the minds and bodies of some of the most damaged women whom I am ever likely to come across, and they were my friends. I cared about them, and I miss them. At the same time, however, vengeance is not mine, nor is it something that I seek or desire. I have long since let go of the fact that my rapists and abusers will never be brought to justice. In fact, it is something that you must do in order to survive prostitution.

Some people struggle with clause 6 because, I believe, they think that the men who buy human beings for sex are, for the most part, good citizens in that they are in gainful employment, they pay their taxes, they pay their rent, they buy homes with their partners, they have 2-4 children and they tick every box that society deems to be correct, so we allow them this little indulgence. How do we allow it? Again, through silence and keeping it legal. The men who bought me and all the other women, the men who feed this twisted industry walk among you every day. They are fathers, husbands, colleagues etc. We do not want to acknowledge that a good citizen can behave like a bad human being. I understand that fear. We hate to upset society's little apple cart, but at whose expense do we do that?

I, on the other hand, would be viewed as a bad citizen. I did not have a job, I was supported by the state, I was a heroin addict, and, worst of all, I stood on a public street displaying my wares, luring those good citizens to me as if they had no choice. However, I am a good human being; I always have been. That is the balance that you must find: between the good citizen and the good human being and which of us comes first in the queue for protection.

People ask me how many men. I was bought by four to five offenders two to three nights a week at least 45 weeks of the year for nearly six years. That is an equation that I will never do in my head. I was no sex worker; I was a trapped mind who lived in a body that no longer belonged to me. In fact, I was a disconnected, drug-addicted, walking rape victim. We all were. How our trapped minds coped depended on a wide range of things too complex to explain briefly here. Prostitution is like 'Inception', and it messes with your mind.

I knew women who used their real name and would defend their position. To me, that was frightening, because it meant that they had lost all realistic hope that this could change and had begun to find a sense of value in their own exploitation. It was contented acceptance, fuelled also by the master manipulation of buyers. I believe that there is a fundamental difference between choosing to become and defending what has become of you, and the wise researcher understands that concept. We pick up survival skills, we use laughter as a coping mechanism, and we only trust one another, for we know what the world thinks of us. Those messages come in loud and clear, and there are no messages that we are ever welcome back. We have become the worst insult that a woman can call a woman or a man can bestow on a woman. We sign a social contract that comes at the highest cost, for the small print of that contract, the terms and conditions, are harsh, disturbing and unjustifiable. It would appear to most that we stand free on the street, and yet, everywhere, we are in chains.

Prostitution and sex trafficking are intrinsically linked: you have one because of the other. For the last 18 months of my time on the Burlington Road, I stood alongside a trafficked woman. She became my closest friend, and I have never seen a human being so broken down. The conditions in which she lived were inhumane, and, although we had arrived at the same place through different means, we were connected because we were bought, used, exploited, humiliated and raped by the same offenders. One night I would be bought, and, a few nights later, the same man would buy her. On a couple of occasions, we were bought together. That connection can never be broken by anyone at any time in any country.

There are some who argue that people have a right to do with their body what they wish. However, I do not see that as an absolute right. If what you do with your body promotes and feeds an industry that, at its worst, results in the rape and sodomisation of children, then it is much more of a limited right. What I believe is an absolute right, as stated in article 4 of the Declaration of Human Rights, is that slavery and servitude in all their forms must be prohibited. We must always remember that the liberty of a few should never come before the freedom of many. Any time in history that that has happened, human dignity has been removed and freedom lost.

I never describe what Sweden did 15 years ago as a model. They have set a remarkable example that Europe must now follow. As we know, three countries already have. It comes as no surprise to me that it was Sweden that set this example, because, as the most equal society in the world, it was the only country where the reclaiming of human dignity could have begun. Sweden placed human dignity first. They fully understand the concept of human dignity, which is the value and respect that we place on one another as human beings. What happens when we place human dignity first, as Sweden has proved beyond doubt, is that good triumphs, whereas, in countries where it is placed last, evil thrives, as is abundantly evident in countries that have decriminalised or legalised and tolerated prostitution. That evil is both human trafficking and the place where vulnerable women and children are trafficked into: prostitution. There, they join the addicted, disconnected and damaged women like me, who are also trapped but in a different way, to service the needs of a particular group of men.

Arendt concluded that most evils in the world are committed by nobodies, and I agree with her. Furthermore, I believe that it is now time that the nobodies were made accountable and held responsible for the cruel industry and slave trade that they willingly sustain and uphold. In fact, it exists only because of them.

Once again, Sweden did not do a radical or controversial thing; it did the right thing in the name of freedom, justice and equality. Now it is the turn of our island. We have a remarkable opportunity to effect a social change for the greater good, an opportunity that we must not allow to pass us by.

Committee members, I have two beautiful granddaughters, and I want them to grow up in a country, on an island and in a Europe where the bodies into which they have been born are respected and at no time up for sale like that of their beloved grandmother. That is my wish for every little girl. The one sure thing that nearly six years of sexual exploitation taught me is that prostitution is not compatible with humanity; we choose one or the other. I implore you to come to a wise choice.

The Chairperson: Mia, thank you very much. We have had a number of evidence sessions that have been difficult for all of us. This is another. However, it obviously does not come anywhere near how difficult it has been for you. I thank you for coming to the Committee and appreciate your honesty and the way in which you have conducted yourself before us. Members will have questions that we need to ask to do our job of scrutinising your evidence. I hope that you appreciate that. Let me start with a couple of questions, and then I will open it up to members.

I was struck by your testimony when you talked about being raped. At any point, did you contact the police?

Ms de Faote: No. Calling the police is not something that you even think of. As I said, we do not know if we can call it rape. We know that it is, but it feels as if you cannot. It is hard enough for women outside prostitution to take rape cases. Many people do not even believe that a prostituted woman can be raped. It does not even enter our heads to call the police.

The Chairperson: You highlighted the case of you and Jenny. You said that you looked into the man's eyes and he just looked through you as though you did not exist. Is that a typical experience?

Ms de Faote: You are bought; someone has purchased an object. When people buy something and take it home only to find that it does not work properly, the first thing that many of them do is shake it. The same principle applies in prostitution: "I bought you to do this, you are not doing it properly, so I will shake you". You are not seen as fully human. You have been bought. In a way, in prostitution, the conditions are set up for rape to happen. Where you have good citizens, who may be outside this, it would never happen. However, when those conditions are set up, it is more likely. Psychological study after psychological study proves that, if the conditions are set up, human beings are, in fact, capable of anything. That is the problem. That is why even independent women carry personal alarms and legal brothels have panic buttons. You cannot predict or legislate for that. Do you know what I mean? When a person is bought, they do not know how the buyer will act. You can learn the signs telling you when to feel unsafe. It depends also on how many drugs there are in your system, where you are and how cold you are, but really, the conditions are set up for it to thrive and happen.

The Chairperson: Some of the witnesses whom we have had before us said that their clients, as they call them, cared for them and would be concerned for their welfare. In your experience, did the men care for your welfare?

Ms de Faote: Not every man who bought me was violent or abusive, but I refuse to feel grateful just because they were not. Some think that they care. There was a regular of mine who had never been abusive or violent towards me. He picked me up off the ground in a terrible state, but I did not get out of that car without servicing his needs. He would justify his action, maybe, because he showed me a kind act. However, the fact that they buy means that they are all aware that we are not standing out in the street because we have functional lives. I only met one woman who was not addicted to alcohol or drugs and did not have underlying psych issues. Buyers know that. In fact, the more vulnerable you look, the more popular you are, because it is not about sex; it is about power.

The Chairperson: It was not clear to me from some of the notes that I read what age you were when you started.

Ms de Faote: I started at 33, when I got addicted to heroin. I worked briefly on Benburb Street, then I was on the Burlington Road from early 2005 to 10 October 2010. That was the last night that I stood on the street.

The Chairperson: We are particularly interested to know how many of the people involved in prostitution are victims of human trafficking. From your experience during that time, what is the prevalence of human trafficking? Can you also let me know what age some of the girls are? Are there any minors involved? Perhaps you could address those two points.

Ms de Faote: Sure. Most of the trafficked coerced women are indoors, although the woman whom I knew was not. She had been taken out of Africa 10 years beforehand, and she began in Greece. Then she was brought to Switzerland, the UK and finally Dublin. The reason that we got close was that I heard her speak a language, and I had been to that part of Africa some years before. That was how we got close. Her trafficker or controller watched her everywhere she went; he would patrol the streets. She was sent out at 5.00 pm and worked continuously until 5.00 am. She had to return with every €100. She was addicted to crack, and he was the dealer. He barred her from speaking to me. He could not stand me, not because I might get her to work for someone else or get her off drugs but because I treated her like a human. I was the only friend that she had had in 10 years. I reminded her of her children at home when I spoke of mine, and that was the thing that could have taken her from him: humanity. I challenged him once, and he walked away from me. It was quite eerie. However, he sent me a message by beating her and sending her to me. She defended him. She had this loyalty to him. I understand now that it is trauma-bonding. Women kept in those conditions can get an attachment to their controllers, traffickers or pimps. She defended him, and I could not understand it. I took her to my home once, after she had been — I describe it in the submission. I thought that I could just get her out of the country and get her home, but I had no understanding really of the bond that women who have been under so much control, constraint and abuse form with their abusers. Much as I loved and cared for her, I could not break it. She returned to him.

The Chairperson: Tell us about the age profile of some of the other victims.

Ms de Faote: I never met a young girl under about 17. I knew two or three who were 18 and 19. I never met a 14- or 15-year-old on the street. I really do not know what I would have done, because I had a daughter at home who was the same age. I knew 18-year-olds. I do not know exactly what age they were when they entered, but they were that age when I went on the street. Then there were a few older ladies who had been on the street for 20 years. One night, one woman said, "I'm retiring". I remember looking at her and thinking, "My God, is that me in 20 years?". It was just so strange.

The street is different. There are rules. There is a hierarchy. It is quite a complex place to be. In some ways, there are normal group dynamics. The older ones are shown respect. The younger ones can be quite chaotic, because crack cocaine causes unpredictable behaviour, and they put themselves at much more risk. I cannot tell you how hard it is as a mother of a daughter to watch an 18-year-old get in the back of a car. Then she comes back, and she is not quite sure exactly what happened.

One night, one of the younger ones was thrown out of the back of a van. She knew that the man had inserted something inside her. She felt as if something was still stuck, but she could not get it. So another girl and I had to help her and physically take it out. I cannot tell you what it is like to hold an 18-year-old in my arms whom I could not send home because she did not have a home. I could not ring her parents because they were not around. I watched her cry. All we could do was give her money so that she could go and get something that would numb it all. When she came back about two weeks later, she was so angry. She owned the street, and she fought with everybody. I thought, "God, is it anger or is it just, you know?". She was a child really. She was so damaged, hurt and humiliated, and she did not know where to place that, so she came back angry.

It is quite a cruel world out there. The way you cope with trauma and your survival skills depend on a number of things. It is quite hard to witness. Yes, we laugh a lot, but that is because, if you got angry, you were afraid about how angry you would get. If you cried, you might never stop. So laughter is a kind of release. We laughed at some of the strangest things.

The Chairperson: This will be my final question. I will then bring other members in. Clause 6 concerns the criminalisation of the buyer. Sweden has pioneered that, but it has not stopped prostitution or trafficking. The evidence that we heard when we were there is that it has reduced it but that it is still there. What makes you believe that criminalising the buyer would have an impact, both

here in Northern Ireland and in the Republic if it were to do it, on what you have told us about today and reduce the problem?

Ms de Faite: I personally do not believe that anybody has the right to buy another human being to do with their body what they wish. I think that that should be in law regardless. Sweden's figures speak for themselves, and, no, it has not been abolished altogether. It will probably never be wiped out completely because, in this world, we will always have people who take advantage of the vulnerable and make profit on the backs of other human beings. No one, not even Sweden, the most equal society in the world, has found a cure for the human condition and all its complexities. That does not mean that we should not do anything.

Ms McCorley: Go raibh maith agat, a Chathaoirleach. Thanks for your presentation. It must be very difficult for you to talk about that. It is probably the most horrific thing that I have heard in all this. How did you manage to exit the life that you were in? Would you mind telling us how you did that? Was it unusual for someone to exit?

Ms de Faite: I did not decide one day that I had had enough. My daughter battled an illness. She became quite ill and had to get some inpatient care. While she was there, she met a social worker. She took to her. My daughter would be quite guarded. We had lived quite an isolated life. I was at home all day minding her, and I left to go to the Burlington Road three nights a week. Apart from that, it was just us. Anyway, she let her in. That social worker asked me to come into her office one day, which I did, with the usual guarded front. She asked me a few questions that nobody had ever asked me before. She asked me what life was like for me, what it was like to be out there all alone, what it was like to be a mother and watch my daughter fade and feel helpless. Nobody had ever asked me those questions. I had only ever met judgement and people's presumptions.

Anyway, I began to talk to her. I spoke to her every time that I went out. I trusted her. I told her things that I had not told anybody. I let her in. When my daughter was well enough to come home, the social worker asked me if I trusted her enough to make two phone calls on my behalf. I said yes. I had previously worked for the health board for 10 years, eight of which were as an administrator for a detox unit for heroin users. She rang my former boss, a consultant psychiatrist. He met me, and he made the decision. He rang me and said that I would be going to rehab at St Michael's and then on to the Rutland. So even in the end, I did not make the decision. She could see choices. I just could not. My choice might have been a much darker one.

Ms McCorley: So it was rehab.

Ms de Faite: Yes. I had a medical detox for three weeks. I then spent five weeks in the Rutland. I then had severe post-traumatic stress. I had suffered disassociation after the gang rape. I viewed the woman whom I was at night, "Lucy", as separate. I had to conquer that. It often involved two people and a chair for Lucy, so that I could own all of that and find myself again. It was like a seven-year war was over. I did not know who I was, but I now know that disassociation and all that is quite common. I also read a lot about trauma and how to recover. I went to Ruhama, and I have really not looked back since. I knew that education was the one thing that would save me. It is the one thing that pulls people out of adversity. For the most part, it is the lack of education that leads women to end up in prostitution.

Ms McCorley: Have you been able to go to some of the people who lived the life that you were in and show them how they can escape?

Ms de Faite: I work with the anti-trafficking office in the Immigrant Council of Ireland (ICI) and with Ruhama, but I have mainly been active in getting this law before us and now here. I have given my insight to a couple of researchers. I could not go back to that street and offer advice. It would be too close. It is only three years since I worked out there. My friends are still there. So I give my insight to the people who know what to do with it, whether in drawing up policy or care services. It may be that one day I can help, but, at the moment, I could not go to the front line as such.

Ms McCorley: You said that nearly everybody has an addiction and complex issues. You said that you were addicted to heroin. Would most of the women whom you met have had addictions such as that and those kinds of complex issues?

Ms de Faote: Only one whom I met did not. With the older women, it tended to be alcohol. The younger ones were addicted to crack, heroin and anything that was going. Some of the heroin addicts were more chaotic than others, but, yes, everyone was addicted. It may have been alcohol with some or speed. It was sometimes tablets or what they call polysubstance abuse — a combination of whatever.

Ms McCorley: Thinking about those people and the incidents that you described, can you see clause 6 putting off those kinds of people from purchasing sex? If they can do those types of things, do you think that clause 6 would deter them? That is what I find difficult.

Ms de Faote: Yes. It is the one and only thing that will stop them. As one said to me once, "I don't worry about the police because, so long as I get to the post before she does, I can pay the €50 fine". Clause 6 is the only thing to do, and I believe that it is the right thing to do. I know very well the men who bought me. I spent six years in their company. Those are not men who will be watching this debate or listening to it — you know what I mean — they are not going to take a risk there. They have to be made accountable, and they know that. They get away with it now. Society permits them to do it. However, once society and the Government are over it, and I do not mean by imposing a €50 fine that they get in the post box before their partner, they will have to take responsibility. The only way that you will change such behaviour is by making them responsible for their actions.

Ms McCorley: What do you think that the penalty should be, if, say, clause 6 were introduced for someone found guilty of paying for sexual services?

Ms de Faote: I think that France is going to bring in €1,000 or €1,500. In Sweden, it is based on your income — we are not as up to date as Sweden for that — but it should be substantially more than €50.

Ms McCorley: You have made your case that you think that this will be the deterrent. Clause 6 is a single clause. What about the complex needs and issues of those women? Where does it leave them?

Ms de Faote: I am often asked that. If I were still out there, and somebody came along and said, "We are going to legalise this", I would have thought that they were mad. I would have said, "Look around — seriously — are you formally going to make this legitimate?" If you had said to me, "This is terrible; you have to stop; nobody is ever going to be allowed to buy you again; this is awful", that is not what I would have heard. I would have heard, "Oh my God, she is about to remove what gives me access to the drug that keeps me sane". If the drug were removed, I would remember; I would not be numb any more, but that does not mean that I would not do it any more. It would have been hard, and I would have been sick, but I would have had to reach out for the help that was there but just could not see.

Ms McCorley: That is a fair point. There are different views on how you deal with prostitution. There is a view that dealing with it in a single clause is not the best way and that we need to look at it and explore what is involved. By talking about those women, you have made the case that you definitely have to look into what their lives are like and how you address their needs and health issues. You have made a good case for looking at it more comprehensively.

Ms de Faote: There is clause 6. However, I am fully aware that those women will need support systems. I would like to see the money that comes from the fines being placed directly into those support systems. For me, the very least that they can do is contribute financially to repair the damage that they have caused. Yes, I am aware that there are exit needs, and the women will need support.

Mr Humphrey: Thank you very much for your presentation and evidence, Mia. I know that it is a cliché to say it, but it is really powerful and very distressing not only for you but for those of us listening. There is a huge responsibility on us as legislators to listen very carefully to what you said and act on it.

The Committee has received evidence on this issue over the past few months. You used the terminology that you were "bought" or people came "to buy". Others who have given evidence recoiled at that terminology being used and would not agree with you. I am not saying that you are comfortable saying it, but why are you using that terminology, and why do you think that it is the appropriate terminology?

Ms de Faoitte: People tend to say the "purchase of sex", but you cannot buy sex. It is the purchase of a human being for sex. When a person came to me and asked for a sexual act, I did not take it out of my pocket and give it to them. They had to buy me and all of me, and I had to go with them and all of me had to go with them. You always have to buy the person before you gain access to the body.

Mr Humphrey: If I picked you up correctly, you said that you came in contact with only one prostitute who was not on either alcohol or drugs. Were alcohol and drugs required to see you through the day or the night?

Ms de Faoitte: For me personally?

Mr Humphrey: Collectively.

Ms de Faoitte: I would have been quite religious in how I used my heroin, as I had to keep some stability for my daughter, so I would smoke 10 to 15 lines in the morning. I never smoked it before I went out to the street, because, when you are in the early stages of withdrawal, your senses are heightened, and I felt safer being out there with heightened senses rather than taking heroin before I went, in which case you would be numb, but a lot of women take it beforehand. The minute I jumped in a taxi to get home, it was the first thing I took. I smoked only one bag a day prior to the gang rape and disassociation, but it increased after that, so, yes, I was taking more to shut out quite a few things. I could not say, because we do not have conversations as such, but I do know that some women, if they have had a bad experience, go and get alcohol and come back. Some women earn £100, go off, get stoned and come back.

Mr Humphrey: It could be part of the coping mechanism.

Ms de Faoitte: It could be, or sometimes it is chaotic addiction.

Mr Humphrey: You said that, for the buyers, it was not about sex but power. If you are comfortable enough, can you expand on that?

Ms de Faoitte: In this day and age, given the access we have to the Internet and what you can get, you can actually go online and meet consenting adults with no money involved or whatever. There appear to be quite a number of people, groups and couples who are into all sorts of things, and you can do that without ever handing over money, so what are they buying?

Mr Humphrey: We have also had evidence from various groups and individuals that have come before the Committee and on our visit to Stockholm. People have said that women have a choice, and they make that choice freely. Do you believe that?

Ms de Faoitte: I do know that a few women say that they are happy to be there and are independent. I have spoken to a number of them on occasion. I still do not believe anybody has the right to buy them, no matter how happy they declare themselves to be. They are very few. As I said earlier, the liberty of a few should never be taken before the freedom of so many. As I said, I made what I thought was a rational choice, but I was not in the right state of mind — in addiction, nobody is in the right state of mind. That is why rehab was invented; because we make messes of our lives and stuff. The ability to see choices goes or becomes extremely affected by trauma and disconnection from society in general.

A lot of the women whom I stood beside were second-generation addicts, so addiction and dysfunction were not unfamiliar. In fact, some of them insisted that it was the only thing they ever knew. If it was a quiet night on the street, all of a sudden there would be a fuss, because, when you get used to trauma, it can be something that you crave or feel comfort in. You lose your ability to see choices, and, for some women, that choice was never there. It was like their life's script was already written, so they did not see it. They considered me to be quite strange, and they were very protective of me because they felt that I should not be there. I was respectable and educated. They were extremely protective of me, but that did not tell me that they felt that I was a better person or whatever. It tells me one thing, and that is how little value they placed on their own life.

Mr Humphrey: A few weeks ago, this Committee had a joint meeting with the Committee in the Irish Parliament at the Dáil. During your evidence, you said that you wanted laws to protect women in

Ireland, on the island and Europe. What do you think would happen with prostitution if laws were enacted in the Dáil and the Northern Ireland Assembly did not follow suit?

Ms de Faöite: I think that some people would travel up North. If we close it off to them and cut off their profits and whatever, they will transfer their commodities to where they can legally sell them. The next nearest place to us is you and England. They will move. France has closed its doors now, and they will shift to Spain. Israel is looking at this. Croatia is looking at this. It will move on. Yes, you would need to take account of that if we were to do that. I would like to see the whole of —

Mr Humphrey: So, the problem would be displaced.

Ms de Faöite: It would be. Yes, of course. Sweden is not attractive to them anymore, because why would they import women when it is illegal to buy them?

Mr Elliott: Thanks very much for the presentation and the evidence. You talked about support services and the potential for support for victims. How do you see that operating? I assume that you would need quite a lot of people on the ground assisting the people who are involved in prostitution and, obviously, the rehabilitation. Can you explain a bit what is on your mind on that?

Ms de Faöite: In the South, Ruhama is the only organisation that looks after women who are affected and exiting and while they are still in prostitution. It needs extra support systems to be put in place. It looks after trafficked women as well. A number of things need to be sorted that are in our recommendations — the definition of trafficking, its status and safe accommodation. The recommendations are made by a subcommittee, and it allows for those and brings those in.

Mr Elliott: How much of that do you see as being government's responsibility, as opposed to the responsibility of agencies or voluntary groups?

Ms de Faöite: I think that it is government's responsibility to make sure that the funds are available for it, because it has happened and been tolerated.

Mr Elliott: When you were involved in prostitution, did you feel that you were trafficked in any way? We are looking here at the legislation on human trafficking. Would you have said that you were trafficked in any way?

Ms de Faöite: No, I was not trafficked. There are very few Irish women left in prostitution. It is minimal, and we tend to be on the street. With a lot of women who are on the street, their pimps come in the form of drug-addicted boyfriends or partners. I had a partner who never went to the street, yet expected something to be brought home. For a long time, I was quite nervous, and I do not really know why. I look back now and think, "God, why did I not just ...", but you do not see that when you are there.

Mr Elliott: You indicated that you feel that this legislation would reduce prostitution. Do you feel that it would significantly reduce drug abuse as well?

Ms de Faöite: In the sense that the women affected that are affected reach out for help. Ruhama and the organisations look at everything in the person's life, whether there are court issues, children's issues, drug issues or whatever. That is one of the things that has to be tackled.

Mr Elliott: So, that would be one of the support services required as well.

Ms de Faöite: Yes.

The Chairperson: Mr Elliott asked whether you feel that you were a victim of human trafficking. That is a fair question. Sometimes we are in danger of thinking that this Bill is about only prostitution and human trafficking. The Bill's title refers to human trafficking and exploitation. I am not going to ask whether you feel that you were exploited. That is a silly question for me to ask, but we have to bear in mind that it is not about just human trafficking and prostitution; it is about exploitation.

One of the arguments against clause 6 is that it could make it more dangerous for women, because it will drive prostitution underground. What is your response to that?

Ms de Faote: You will only hear that from one side, because it is a fallacy. The error in the reasoning of that argument is that prostitution is not like any other vice. Drugs and guns need the underground; they only survive underground because it is criminals dealing with criminals. Where prostitution differs is that it only thrives and survives because of the good citizen or the general public. It will always need a face. It would not exist and there would be no money to be made, if you could not advertise. It needs a face and a domain. Prostitution is the one vice that cannot exist underground.

The Chairperson: There is an academic debate that rages around this issue. People say that there are statistics to say that Sweden has worked and there are statistics to say that it has not worked. At times, ideological views on this are very polarised. What is your view of the academic debate?

Ms de Faote: I currently study at a university. In our sociology department, we have two academics who differ from my opinion. Mind you, they have never spoken to me, even though they know I am there and they know who I am. I think that it was clearly demonstrated here last week that the research does not stand up to scrutiny. There are a lot of female academics. Sometimes, I do not have an answer; I will never understand women who fight to keep women in sexual exploitation, especially when they shout it out from the ivory towers of universities. They are places that the women I stood alongside will never gain access to. They usually put the argument forward that a woman has a right to do whatever she wants with her body. I have already explained how I feel about that. Sometimes, they use the underground fallacy. I do not, for the life of me, understand their position. I tell you one thing: you will get two or three of them in every sociology department in every university everywhere. For every two or three you get, there will be four, five or six sociologists — as there are in my university — who would never take that position.

The Chairperson: Obviously, you have been very brave to give a voice to your experience. What has been the response from individuals currently in the industry, if you want to call it that, to your having stepped forward and spoken about this?

Ms de Faote: It has been mainly positive. I have not received any nastiness or anything, any threats, anything. In fact, a couple of independent women I have spoken to have been quite compassionate. We do not agree with each other, but there has not been any animosity. I do not have any animosity towards them. It is the right thing to do for the greater good and to combat the evil of human trafficking. It has been positive. I have good friends and good support. I have great support from my lecturers, especially in the philosophy department. I keep myself very much to myself, and I do not trust easily. I have a handful of good friends I would not swap for the world. It has been mainly positive. Absolutely.

The Chairperson: Good. The last point I want to make goes back to one that Ms McCorley made. Some of us are struggling to grasp this point. We have existing legislation in Northern Ireland that deals with coercion, and there is no defence at all, even in ignorance, if you have engaged in sex with prostitutes and they have been trafficked or coerced into the industry. If those individuals are not concerned about the current laws and they are not concerned about you — you talked about that individual who raped you, just looking through you like you did not exist — if they have no modicum of consciousness about them under existing laws, why, then, will clause 6 have any impact on them?

Ms de Faote: It makes them responsible. The issue of fines that will be more than €50 makes them accountable. It puts them at risk of bringing what they do in the dark into what they do in the day. Do you get me?

The Chairperson: Yes.

Ms de Faote: It is a big risk for them. I know that most of the men who bought me would not be prepared to take it.

The Chairperson: OK. No other members want to ask questions so, Mia, thank you very much for coming to the Committee. It has been a very powerful piece of testimony for us, so I really appreciate the time that you have taken to come and speak to us. Thank you.

Ms de Faote: Thanks for having me.

The Chairperson: Not at all.