

Dear Committee Members,

I write with regards to Human Trafficking and Exploitation Bill, clause 6 in particular. Clause 6 of the Bill will turn the offence of paying for sex with a coerced prostitute into an offence of paying for sex with any adult person. I'm afraid I feel compelled to oppose this; and I believe that being an adult person, who is regularly paid for sex, provides me with sufficient experience to make an informed opinion.

To begin with, I find the way clause 6 is worded rather alarming. It criminalises paying for sexual services of a person, not a prostitute. I am not familiar with the finer details of law in Northern Ireland; I don't know how many times a person should sell their sexual services, or how many buyers of sexual services a person must have - is one enough? - before they are considered a prostitute in the eye of the law, but it's irrelevant here because the Bill talks about a person, not a prostitute. Quite frequently a person who provides sexual services to another person in exchange for housing, paid bills, meals and shopping trips is known as a wife, a girlfriend or a mistress. And housing, shopping trips and meals fall neatly under your definition of payment. You don't seriously think that a law, once made, is only ever used for the purpose politicians have in mind. An alarming number of politicians will become offenders overnight if you pass this Bill, all you need is a prosecutor who can read. If I could suggest an amendment to this clause, then, keeping in mind your aim of fighting human exploitation rather than all sex between persons above 18, I would change "a person" for "a coerced individual". But no, wait! An offence of paying for sexual services of a coerced individual already exists! So what exactly are you trying to achieve by re-wording the law that's already in place?

However, semantics aside, common sense tells me clause 6 is aimed at clients of prostitutes, not just any person, consenting or coerced. I would like to ask you to consider this. If some imaginary country were to prohibit alcohol, would the rate of contraband alcohol in this country rise or fall? The logical guess is "rise". If this country were to ban smoking, would all smokers just quit? Maybe some would, but the majority would secretly smoke anything that's smuggled in, regardless of its quality. It seems logical then to assume that if this country were to criminalise paying for sex, people will still pay for sex. Only now this country created a market for controlled sex providers - those who won't be able to blackmail the buyer, or report the buyer to police, or to complain to anyone about the way they are treated. Why not make a country instead where people selling sex with full protection of the law will create sufficient competition for traffickers?

In my experience, the majority of people involved in prostitution are there because of poverty and inequality, because selling sex is their last resort. You can't possibly believe that by removing their last resort you'll be reducing the ways in which they are exploited. On the contrary, by doing so you'll force a lot of prostitutes to seek help from third parties, those who will promise to find clients for them. This is what I would have to do if such a law was passed in Scotland where I am based. And, same as in Scotland, you don't seem to consider making an offence of buying prawns, haddock or salmon, even though a simple google search provides you with a lot of articles and research into exploitation of immigrant workers involved in the sea fishing industry in Northern Ireland. Would it be because you know that not buying fish isn't going to help those exploited workers? How is sex different? Because you have moral objections to it? Is this reason enough to throw a few hundred women in Northern Ireland in the river? This act would only reinforce the public perception that prostitutes are expendable and disposable. That's ok if they get hurt as long as we save those few trafficking victims, right?

Human trafficking is a complex issue, with main contributing factors being global inequality and the lack of rights by parties affected, not to mention restrictive migration laws. A successful fight against human trafficking and exploitation should involve reforms on a global level and a human rights based approach. This is achieved by actually giving people rights, not by taking their last source of money away from them. With clause 6 as it is, you're increasing human trafficking and exploitation, not reducing it. I urge you to throw it in the bin where it belongs.

Regards,

Anonymous Scotland sex worker.