

Submission to the Justice Committee Northern Ireland Assembly

The Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill 2013. Focus: Clause 6.

24th October 2013.

Thank you for this opportunity to make representation on the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Bill 2013, and in particular the critically important Clause 6 – which creates a criminal offence for the purchase of sex. This Clause is the focus of my submission. I have lived experience and feel strongly that this piece of legislation is an opportunity to both combat human trafficking and the exploitation of prostitution but also to create a more equal and humane society. Below I outline my lived experience of prostitution; first-hand knowledge of sex trafficking and; my message on the issue of criminalising the purchase of sex to the Justice Committee members of the Northern Ireland Assembly as legislators, but also and critically, as human beings. My experience occurred in the Republic of Ireland however, prostitution and trafficking on the Island of Ireland knows no borders and legislation for the whole Island will be critical to combat the evil of trafficking and degradation of prostitution.

My name is Mia and I think, therefore I am, for I will never deny where heroin and prostitution brought me but I refuse to let it define who I am today, because if it defines me, it becomes me and it is not all I am.

I have chosen now to let you in to the place that it brought me, to share my thoughts on what happened during my time on the Burlington Road in Dublin, by day it is a beautiful, elegant street where old charming houses stand tall and proud but by night it becomes something far more sinister, for it is the place where men come to purchase human beings for sex. I was one of those human beings for over 5 years.

MY DEFINITION

Prostitution is when a human being ceases to be seen as that human being in the eyes of others, and becomes a trapped mind in a body that no longer belongs to her/him.

How that trapped mind copes depends on a wide range of things, but mainly we cope by increasing the very thing that brought us to the street, our addictions, in fact, I only ever met one Irish woman who hadn't a drink, drug or underlying psych problem. I can only speak for myself with regards my intake of heroin and how it affected me physically and how I used it to block out what I had become but I witnessed the deterioration of other women over the years, many of whom did not even realise it, that was the saddest thing, some of them believed this was the only place they could be, many were second generation addicts, or were children of alcoholics, where sexually abused, grew up in the care system or worse, where homeless from their teenage years. They were women who mostly had never known anything but trauma and had had dramatic lives, so it was all that they knew, this was just the way it was, nobody ever told them it could be different, or they could be something else, for many it would appear that their life script had already been written.

The dynamics of the street are quite complex, as we led quiet complex lives, you do not just arrive on the Burlington Road one night and decide "I'm working from here". Oh no, a lot of women have been there long before you and have earned their spot, so to speak. There is a hierarchy system in play and the "normal" stages of group dynamics happen. I wandered around aimlessly for a couple of months, standing at different spots but I knew the one I wanted, it was right across from the side entrance of the Burlington Hotel, I figured it was the safest place because if I needed to run from danger, the hotel was always open. So I kept returning to it and after a while it became my spot, at which I would stand and be purchased for the next 5 years. If anyone would have told me that I would still be there in 5 years I would never have believed them but my mind was beginning to get trapped and I got lost in a paradox.

THE PARADOX

Society assumes many views on the issue of choice but they forget one thing, your ability to see choices becomes extremely compromised by the effects of trauma and disconnection from society in general. For me as an addict, I was fortunate, an education, a work ethic, a basic sense of right and wrong, but obviously my life was not perfect, my self-esteem/worth was lost somewhere as I picked heroin up at the age of 33yrs, having never taken any kind of drug before that. In fact it was the

set of values I was raised with that actually brought me to the street, as I had an expensive habit but crossing the line into crime, robbery, etc was not an option for me but I knew I had a valuable commodity, for I had a female body which I could sell.

And so the paradox begins, at first you believe you can be strong enough to cope for the short time until you sort your mind out, figure out getting clean. I had a sick child at home so she was my priority, I couldn't be away from her for very long, I was her full-time carer. In fact, the only time we were ever really parted for any length of time was when I went out to work. As I've said before I never believed when I walked out on the street that first night that it would not only own me within a very short time but that it would take from me everything I thought I once was. Initially it does what it's intended to do, it pays for your habit but other things were happening that you're not fully aware of at the time, I was now completely cut off from family, the shame was too much for them; I hadn't a friend in the world that could maybe remind me of who I was. My only human contact was with the men who bought me and the women who sold themselves beside me. That isolation is painful but the most dangerous thing for me was I had become comfortably numb and disconnected, I had to, and how I did this was to increase my heroin habit, I went from smoking one bag a day to keep the physical withdrawals away, to two bags a day because I needed one every-night I returned home in order to sleep, it wasn't a case of getting stoned as I had a child to care for, more just a numbing affect, so I let my eyes water up but I'd never cry, I'd get angry but never scream, heroin is an expert at shutting down your feelings.

And then the evitable happens, rape/sexual assault, for me it came in the form of a gang rape that lasted for what seemed like forever, and in many ways it will, for form that night on, I no longer lived, I just existed in a world where I thought humanity no longer existed and even if I saw traces of it, I didn't trust it. So, now as stated heroin becomes the lifeline to cope with being bought, where it began with selling yourself to cope with heroin, welcome to the paradox, that so very few of us escape from. I am one of the lucky few.

THE REASON IT IS A CRIME

Firstly you must ask yourself one question: Do you believe that people have the right to buy other human beings? When I ask anyone this question, of course they say "No", but when I ask them: "Do you believe that people have the right to buy other human beings for the purpose of their own sexual gratification?", they sometimes hesitate. I understand where this hesitation comes from, because they think "well if she/he is offering it", what's the problem, two consenting adults, a business transaction!! I say no, this question requires a yes/no answer. You either believe it or you don't, end of. I stood on that street selling myself but I always knew they had no right to buy me. There are many reasons why women/men find themselves in prostitution and all of them have nothing to do with feeling empowered and even if they did feel delusionally empowered, I don't care if he/she is offering themselves up in a gold bikini on a silver platter in the pent house suite of the Berkeley Court, No One actually has the right to buy them, period!!

RAPE

This part is so hard to talk about never mind writing it down. For I fear this is the ultimate crime committed against us that will forever go unpunished. For it is near impossible to prove, unless you are left in intensive care. So we don't really talk about it, we might mention it to each other but then we move on but we are never the same, well I wasn't anyway.

It was December, it was freezing cold, there were more than usual out because it was close to Christmas, I got an offer to do a job with another girl, it was for a Christmas party, she said there would be only a few men and that she knew one of them well and we'd be fine. I was a little naïve as I was only on the street for 5mths and the thought getting one large sum of money meant I would not have to come out again until after Christmas, so I went. It turned out to be 8 men in total. I was nervous now but we agreed the terms, what was allowed, what wasn't, etc, we were paid in full and we got on with it.

There was alcohol and cocaine offered, I took cocaine but I didn't drink alcohol my whole time in addiction, I always thought better to stay away from it, one substance was hard enough to cope with. So you can imagine what went on, not all the men wanted something from us and I did feel somewhat in control, but was aware my friend was getting drunk and the men were as well and getting loud. When the time was up we were left alone for a minute, I collected my things and told my friend to get ready to leave, I went in to the other room and said, "right guys, we're gonna go and thanks", or words to those effect, but I could feel something had changed, the atmosphere, you could feel it, the hairs at the back of my neck began to stand up, one of them said "you're not going anywhere, we're not finished". I tried to reason by saying "c'mon fair is fair lads" but I looked at the door and glanced in the bedroom where my friend was still not ready. I couldn't just run and leave her. The next thing my hair was pulled and I was pushed over the sofa and then it began, I was dragged back into the bedroom where myself and my friend were subjected to an unimaginable horror; we were raped, both anally and orally as well. We were like ragdolls, not even, we were just objects to be passed around, my skin was crawling, my insides felt like they would come right up my throat, I wanted to die. I looked at my friend and I couldn't protect her, she was much younger than me, much thinner and weaker. I looked at the man who was on top of me, I looked straight into his eyes, I thought can't you see me, cant you hear me scream and I will never forget the eyes that looked back at me, for they were blank, he looked straight through me. I have spoken to a couple of women who describe the same blank stare, it is frightening. They tried to insert objects inside us; my friend was placed on a chair with her legs wide open. I'm sorry but I cannot speak about what happened next but eventually it ended and they left, thankfully they didn't take their money back off us so we could get out

of there. I picked my friend up, half dressed her and myself and we left. I left the building with a bruised body and face, smelling of urine and bleeding from my rectum.

Do you now understand how I couldn't see the choices anymore? As for my friend: she died. I don't know the day she died, I only know when I hadn't seen her for a few months after I asked and someone told me, she died of an overdose. It might have been heroin in her arm the day she died but I know what really killed her.

I have gone over that night a thousand times in my head, not the whole night, as sometimes I feel if I go there again I might never come back, but I mean I've tried to understand why it happened. I don't believe when those men picked us up that night that that was what they knew they would do, something changed during the course of the night, it might have been the cocaine use, although I don't know if all of them took it but put that with alcohol and it's a dangerous combination, and fuel it with ego and power and a mob mentality, I believe a frenzy began and it over took them. This is not to say that I justify what they did do us in any way whatsoever but understanding what happened helps me cope. And then I look at the bigger picture, they were men connected to the Celtic tiger, they were men who had made money during this time, I know that by some of the conversations I heard, they felt powerful, we were taken to a building which is now owned by NAMA.

A lot of values were lost during the Celtic tiger years, ordinary people valued materialistic things, people spoke about how much they're house was now worth, etc. We were already considered the lowest of the low, for I was a "junkie whore". What I'm trying to say is if you set up the conditions of rape, it will happen. I don't mean myself and my friend alone in an apt with 8 men, we as prostituted women are a prime target for any man who wants to fulfil the sexual fantasy of rape - only with us they can do it for real and get away with it, and both society and the laws that govern it have a major role in keeping it that way, **and it will remain unpunishable while it remains legal to buy another human being in the first place.**

I returned to the street 3 weeks after that night, but I returned in a different way. I was no longer living, I felt my body no longer belonged to me. I now existed. How I coped with this existence was through disassociation, a skill the mind can develop in order to cope with trauma, I had done it as a child. So during the day I was a mother and cared for my child, smoked heroin in the morning like medication to keep the feelings a bay but at night I became someone else, who was strong, streetwise and not an addict but would return home every night with something to help me sleep. They had separate clothes, separate toiletries, they were very different and yet the same. No I do not have a personality disorder; it is a learned coping skill.

At night I learned to read and understand the behaviour of the men who bought me, I worked out who I would be safest with, I took everything into account from their body language, their tone of voice, their profession, their personality traits, everything went into the equation. I would spend hours working out based on all the information, where in their lives they felt inadequate or lacking in power that they were down here replacing it, you work that out and you have the power, some do not take to kindly to this, that was their problem not mine. I was assaulted on two more occasions, when I was caught off-guard, grabbed from behind on the Burlington Rd. But I heard many stories of rape and beatings from the girls but like I said before, it's mentioned and then it's not discussed again. I remained strong on the outside but inside my heart as broken.

TRAFFICKED

I didn't get to meet many foreign women, I only met one who was trafficked on to the street in those years, for obvious reasons they are kept away, locked up, moved around, in fact I didn't really know the extent of the problem until last year. When I realised how big it was, I was so full of shame and appalled that my country had let it get to this stage. We are connected both prostitutes and trafficked women, although that initial introduction may be different but we are connected because we are bought, used, exploited, humiliated and raped by the same men. They are often gang-raped into submission, to break them down; I understand that only too well. But I find it unimaginable to think of what it must be like to be in a country where you know no one; maybe you don't even speak the same language.

I was working one night, it was a quiet night when I heard a language I recognised, I had not heard it in some years but I knew it immediately. I looked towards the end of the road and saw a woman talking on the phone. As she approached me, I smiled and asked if she was speaking She said yes, do you speak it, I said no but I had been to that part of Africa and recognised it. She was overjoyed; we sat down and spoke for ages about her homeland, good and bad.

We began a friendship but I soon began to notice things, she would have marks on her face, arms and legs, I had a feeling she was working for someone. She began to open up, that someone had trafficked her from home, right across Europe and finally landing in Ireland. At this stage she had been completely broken down, his control was all that she knew. He would beat her if she was challenging, kept her passport, she was put out to work at 6pm and worked continuously until 5a/m every night, she was addicted to crack cocaine and he was the dealer, she had to return with every 100 euro's she made. She made nothing.

He barred her from speaking to me, but we met at secret places and she kept my number under different male names. I was the only friend she'd had in years. Together we had many chats, we laughed at things many would be shocked at, it was our way of coping but we also had hard times. I challenged him, she suffered for it, I challenged the men who bought her when I found out they actually knew the conditions she lived in, one of them said to me, "I know its terrible, I was thinking about

moving her somewhere safe, a nice clean apt”, I said are you mad, he replied “it just seems like the right thing to do”. I lost it then and replied “a man who has continued to buy a trafficked woman is trying to tell me about the right thing to do”, “firstly she is a chronic crack addict, how are you going to fix that and secondly she has a twisted sense of loyalty and an unhealthy attachment to her trafficker, I don’t suppose you’ve got a clinical psychologist lined up, you just want to play the hero, this is not a movie, this is her reality and the best thing you can do for her is grab your ego and go home to your wife”, too many men come not only buy us but to try be our saviours as well, so they feel not only powerful but protective - more like deluded and bewildered! It would almost be funny, only it’s not: for these men messed around with the minds and bodies, of some of the most damaged women I’ve ever met and they were my friends and I cared about them and I miss them - and every day of my freedom, I will fight for theirs.

I will end the story of my African friend with one of the saddest things I ever seen and for me it puts it into perspective. I was at home one night alone, as my daughter had become very ill and needed some in-patient care. My phone rang and it was Mr. Hero himself but he was different this time, extremely anxious and had my friend with him, there had been a row between her, her trafficker and another girl. He said it was bad and could he please bring her over, she had never been to my home, I kept work and home completely separate but I said yes, as I was on my own.

She arrived, crying uncontrollably, I’d never seen her so upset. I told him to go and I’d look after her. I hugged her and checked her wounds, as she had blood all over her hands, thankfully everything was superficial. It doesn’t really matter what the fight was about, control, drugs, etc. I made her coffee and we had a cigarette together. I said I would run her a bath and get her some pj’s, she looked exhausted. I ran the bath with bubbles, left out a towel and called her in. I left her to relax and went in the other room, I was closing the window, when she called me. I turned around and what I saw shocked me to the core, for there in front of me my friend stood naked, but she had the body of a child, her ribs stuck out, there were no breasts, it was covered in old bruises, new bruises, scratches. She looked like someone who’d just been released from a concentration camp. My eyes welled up but I didn’t want her to see me cry, so I brought her into the bathroom again. She had called me to wash her hair for her as her arms were sore, I washed her hair, took her out of the bath. She put the pj’s on and she sat in between my legs on the floor as I brushed and blow-dried her hair, she was humming just like a child. I put her to bed and sat beside her until she fell asleep. And then I cried and cried for the lost child I had just put to bed, I’ll never forget the image I saw but this wasn’t a concentration camp, in Poland in 1945, this was my apartment, Dublin, 2010, there was no war but there is no law to protect either.

I recently got to go on an outing with some of the survivors of trafficking organised by Ruhama, it was to Dublin Zoo, I took my adored granddaughter with me, she’s 15mths old as I knew some of the women would have their children and there happened to be a little girl approximately the same age as her, they played together as children do, for children don’t see colour, only adults do. We had stopped to see the giraffe’s, they have a new enclosure since I’d last been there and a new baby giraffe. I picked the little girl up to show her, they’re giraffes I said and they come all the way from Africa, she wasn’t that bothered, she like all toddlers was more concerned with trying to climb the fence or attempt to climb the rock, my granddaughter just had managed, normal toddler adventures, yes, she like my granddaughter kept us on our toes that day.

But I looked back around at the giraffe’s, beautiful, graceful creatures from Africa, and then it occurred to me, we bring these animals to our country so that children get to see them. We treat them so well, give them to appropriate shelter, food and settings so they can grow, be healthy and happy, and rightly so. But they are not the only thing that we now import to Ireland – **the whole Island of Ireland** - for we now import women and children from Africa to satisfy the needs of a certain type of men and it is not to be admired and treated with respect like the giraffe’s. Oh no, it is for very different reasons and none of them have anything to do with admiration and respect. I picked up that little girl again, I hugged her and kissed her cheek and I apologized to her on behalf of Ireland. I apologized for what has happened to her beautiful mother but I told her things were about to change. I did not continue on to see the rest of the African plains. How could I after making that connection in my head, could you?

SILENCE

Silence is golden, they say, no it is not, peace and serenity is golden, silence can be deadly. Why have we on this Island stayed silent for so long regarding the purchase of human beings for sex? Is it because it places a different value on women like me and a different value on the women that are trafficked into this country? It is something most people would not admit to, placing the value of one woman over another, sometimes they don’t even see it. But I only have to think what would be happening if the women were being trafficked in from America or Germany, do you think we would tolerated it then? I think not. So if I was a woman born to a “respectable” family from Manhattan, I would be rescued, supported and returned home safely, for America is of great value to us, but if I am born into poverty, uneducated and tricked into coming here from a Eastern European country, I am not entitled to the same treatment because that country is of no value to us. How do we decide this? What right do we have to decide which human being is more valuable than the other?

Haven’t we had enough of silence and secrets, report after report, dirty secrets about exploitation and sexual abuse, but we have acknowledged the wrongs that were done and now we are questioning and looking for answers from the ones who stayed silent and rightly so. It is a most shameful part of our history and are we now willing to create another? I am not, and I, just like history, will not recall the actions of my enemies but the silence of my friends.

PROTECTING THE GOOD CITIZEN

I believe this is where we struggle because for the most part the men who buy human beings for sex are exactly that, they are good citizen's, in that they are in gainful employment, so they pay their taxes, they pay their rent or buy homes with their partners, they have 2.4 children, they tick every box the society deems to be correct, so we allow them this little indulgence, how we allow it is again through silence and keeping it legal. For the men who bought me and all the other women, the men that feed this twisted industry, they walk among you every day, they are fathers, husbands, colleagues etc we don't want to acknowledge that the good citizen can be a bad human being. I understand that fear, for we hate to upset societies little applecart.

I, on the other hand would be viewed as a bad citizen: I didn't 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 these good citizens to me, as if they had no choice. **But I am a good human being, I always have been.** This is the balance you must find: between the good citizen and the good human being and which one of us comes first in the queue for protection.

THOSE WHO SERVE AND PROTECT

I never met an officer or a detective who didn't want to system to change. But they often seemed frustrated, annoyed, not towards us but the offenders. I now understand their frustration, for their hands are tired. Many of the officers have watched women work 20yrs on that street; they have witnessed and heard many horrific stories of rape and abuse. They know more than most that none of us are there because we want to be.

In those years, I never witnessed any officer being disrespectful or inappropriate towards me or any of the women, in fact at times they had to handle women who were angry, high on cocaine, unpredictable and inappropriate, they seemed to understand or they are trained well. I was shown compassion many times by the officers that got to know me, they were a little curious as to how, an articulate, intelligent woman, who worked for a government department for 10yrs, could come to be here. They were curious but never judged me.

I received many cautions for soliciting, I never minded getting a caution for two reasons, one it proves that I existed on that street and two when the figures are done up at the end of the year, if there were no cautions, people may be inclined to believe street work had disappeared and would forget.

I was brought to court once and charged with soliciting but the officer involved did not show up and it was dismissed. I went to work that night, and that officer came looking for me, I found out that he had no intention of showing up, for it was not me he wanted to convict but the man who purchased me. He said he also felt I would find my way out of the street one day and he didn't want me to have a conviction. I couldn't see that possibility at the time, but I'm very grateful to him now.

To the officers at the top who are involved in the discussions and debates, if the debate comes down to the counting of numbers, 15 children trafficked in 2011 in the Republic, how many in the North? The fact that there are any children found here in sexual slavery is appalling. The fact that the traffickers are getting smarter. These officers must keep in touch with their front line, the officers who see the damage and pain first hand, the ones that rescue women or find them in the middle of the night on a street they don't know, having just escaped. Often when you have been away from the frontline, you can get a little disconnected, and it's about budgets and staffing and figures. If that is where your struggle is, then you need to reconnect and remember why you where you are, to serve and protect.

TO THOSE IN POWER

"We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must - at that moment - become the centre of the universe."

Elie Wiesel,

Holocaust Survivor

Nobel Prize winner

Protector of Freedom

The above quote just about sums up all you need to take into account. For human trafficking is the modern day slavery and sexual slavery is the most appalling of crimes, for it removes human beings of all their human rights and dignity. To do nothing is to play an active role in it happening. The world over is waking up to this, my country has no choice but to stand up to it. For freedom is something Ireland had to fight for itself, so we should have no struggle with fighting to protect the freedom of other, no matter what country they come from.

TO THE LAWMAKERS

You must end this struggle and take a brave but challenging step towards change for the good of all, that is the job of the lawmakers, to protect, to implement laws that maintain social security, and strive to find the ideal. Laws have a direct impact on behaviour, believe me if Clause 6 of this Bill is implemented, things will change.

Our strict anti-trafficking laws are vital but I must now make you aware that in fact, **there is no anti-trafficking law which is more powerful than getting the use of another man's slave.**

THOSE THAT OPPOSE

You only support legalisation if you have a vested interest in it, it doesn't make sense otherwise. This interest can be academic, political, financial or personal. There is sometimes an awful glamour attached to taking the wrong side.

Groups like the SWA (sex workers alliance), all I can say is that I never heard of them until last year, does that not tell you something? It should, for they claim to represent who I was, yet I never met one, they never came down to the street to introduce themselves, they didn't have a helpline if any "worker" who was in trouble.

I know what this tells me, it tells me that they only care for an elite group, and that is a very different argument, and it is based more on a need to have their own behaviour sanctioned to serve their own needs and wants, and that argument has nothing whatsoever to do with freedom, justice and equality.

There are some that say they are happy to be there, I never met one but there are a few out there but the liberty of a few should never come before the freedom and human dignity of so many.

TO END

I end my submission now, and you will forgive me if all my words do not run smoothly, this has been an incredibly hard piece to write as it is so personal to me. As for me, I do believe it is not the first time you will read my words, and not because I intend to write a tell all book, no, because I aim in 10 years' time, to be on the panel of experts that will be formed to review the legislation criminalising the purchase of sex - which I hope will be shortly enacted in both Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

On Monday the 3rd of Sept 2012 I walked through the gates of the University of my Dreams, to do a specialised degree in humankind. I survived because I questioned and challenged, I have a mind that can adapt, and I have a love of wisdom, yes my life was tragic but it was never absurd, and that is because, my learned friends, I have always had the Audacity of Hope and the ability to reason.

I leave you with the words of someone who lost their freedom & their life, there is a reason why we remember these words,

"At any moment, anyone can do something to make the world a better place" Anna Frank

And if you haven't realised it by now, this is your moment, don't let it pass you by.

**True healing begins when someone bares witness. My real name is Mia de Faoite
and I have just born witness.**

MY FATHERS WORDS

I stand by everything my daughter is, everything she was and everything I know she will be.

MY DAUGHTERS WORDS

My mother thinks I'm the strong one, but she is the bravest person I know, she's a little odd at times but only because she sees the world a different way, I love my mother and I love the way she sees the world.

MY SISTERS WORDS

As children, the games my sister and I played, mammy's and daddy's, wheeling our babies around, dressing them and us up, happy care free days, children's imaginations at work, the way it should be. Many years later my baby sis is a survivor of many things, the things of the worst horror movie you can imagine.... You know the ones that to you are unbelievable or un-survivable and therefore only a story! But the truth is for many these horrors are a daily reality, children playing not the games of yours or my childhood but a reality game invented by Adults who have stolen their innocence and sold their bodies to the highest bidder..

I look at my sister now some of that sparkle of our childhood will never return, then I look at my daughter and I know this has to stop As human beings so called civilised, we need to unite and CRIMINALISE THE SEX BUYER NOW. I could not protect my baby sis - that guilt never leaves me but perhaps supporting this will protect your baby sis! So help us and turn it off!