

Dear UK Members of Parliament,

We are concerned about attempts to introduce legislation into Parliament that would criminalise paying for sex and close down online sites where sex workers advertise. Touted as solutions to sex trafficking and exploitation, these measures will only exacerbate violence against women, including those who are being exploited.

Legislation that criminalises the purchase of sex is known as ‘the Nordic Model’, or ‘End Demand’. It is widely opposed by sex workers and by organisations such as Amnesty International, the World Health Organisation, and the UK’s national frontline charity for sex worker safety, National Ugly Mugs. In countries where this legal model has been introduced, neither sex workers nor sex worker-led organisations have been consulted. Clear documented harm to the most marginalised women has followed.

Criminalising advertising sexual services online has been [proven](#) to exacerbate harm for sex workers. This is shown by evidence from the United States where similar legislation ([SESTA/FOSTA](#)) was introduced in 2018.

This pandemic is an indication of what happens when sex workers’ incomes are taken away: women are forced into poverty.

The Nordic Model does not help victims of trafficking

Proponents of the Nordic Model claim that criminalising the purchase of sex will help victims of trafficking by reducing prostitution, and by extension trafficking. But trafficking isn’t caused by the demand for sex, but by people’s poverty and lack of options: people are made vulnerable to traffickers for a number of reasons. They may be [trying to migrate](#) and become trapped in abusive situations because people without secure immigration status have few to no rights. They may be trafficked into sexual exploitation through deception, coercion or force, or may choose to enter into sex work knowingly before a situation becomes exploitative later on, and they are unable to leave because, for example, they are threatened. The solution therefore is not to further criminalise sex work, just as other industries where trafficking occurs are not criminalised; but to ensure people have legal ways to migrate, have routes out of poverty, and are empowered to seek support from authorities without the fear of penalty such as detention, deportation or destitution.

Some anti-trafficking initiatives don’t help victims and also cause great harm to sex workers. When police raid brothels in the name of anti-trafficking, it is often [migrant sex workers who are arrested](#). In the UK, when victims of trafficking are ‘rescued’ by police, they can face arrest, detainment as criminals, and forcible deportation – often back to [the same situation](#) in which they were targeted. Sex workers know this and are therefore deterred from reporting ANY violence and exploitation, for fear of deportation.

[Mass raids](#) of workplaces in Soho, in which 250 police officers – many in riot gear, with dog units – raided and closed 18 brothels, resulted in police dragging scantily clad women out onto the street against their will. This was carried out under the guise of stopping trafficking, but failed to refer a single person to the National Referral Mechanism.

Even when people are officially recognised as trafficking victims, material and legal support for them to settle in the UK and escape poverty is absent or inadequate. Women left with no recourse to public funds have increased vulnerability to violence and exploitation.

The Nordic Model increases danger for sex workers

Evidence shows that the Nordic Model does nothing for the very groups it claims to protect. In the Republic of Ireland, violence against sex workers increased dramatically after similar legislation was introduced in 2017 (Northern Ireland implemented the law in 2015). According to [Ugly Mugs Ireland](#), crimes against sex workers almost doubled in the two years following the introduction of the law. A [2020 study](#) commissioned by HIV Ireland found that sex workers who experienced violence at work were increasingly reluctant to report to the police.

National Ugly Mugs worked with the National Police Chiefs Council on [National Policing Sex Work and Prostitution Guidance](#) for police officers encountering sex workers to “engag[e] respectfully and caus[e] minimal harm to sex workers in their role.” However, [National Ugly Mugs also found that:](#)

“Full consent to engage with police down from 28% in 2012 to 9% in 2019 among off-street independent workers. Anonymous consent to share intelligence with police also declined from 95% in 2012 to 75% in 2019. The most common reasons for these include fear of/experience of criminalisation, fear of/experience of stigma, inconsistencies in police responses and a lack of confidence in the ability of police to support sex workers in a discreet and informed way.”

This indicates that the negative treatment of sex workers in the past, coupled with inconsistent approaches by police, continues to impact sex workers’ willingness to engage with authorities and seek support.

In France, the Nordic Model has been in place since 2016. Since then, the already high murder rate of sex workers has dramatically increased. In the six months between June and December 2019, [at least 10 sex workers were killed](#). The victims have overwhelmingly been migrant trans women. A 2018 [Medicins du Monde](#) report found that the law has led to 42% of workers being more exposed to violence, 38% finding it increasingly hard to demand condom use, 70% observing no improvement or a deterioration of their relations with the police, 78% losing income, and 63% experiencing a deterioration of living conditions.

The Nordic Model does not ‘decriminalise’ sex workers

In countries that have brought in the Nordic Model, sex workers have not, as is often promised, been ‘decriminalised’. Brothel-keeping – which is defined as two or more people working together – remains a crime, forcing women to work alone or risk arrest. When police raid workplaces with the stated aim of arresting clients, it is repeatedly sex workers who are charged. This has happened in [Ireland](#), [Norway](#), [Finland](#), and [Sweden](#).

We firmly agree that penalties around outdoor work, usually for soliciting, should be repealed. However, when clients are criminalised, sex workers are forced to evade the police. If you are working outdoors, that might mean having to get into a client’s car too quickly, and not being able to negotiate price, condom use or boundaries. It might mean working in a more isolated area, increasing the risk of violence.

The Nordic Model penalises the most marginalised

Criminalising clients has been [shown to increase violence](#) for the most marginalised workers, the same workers often conflated with trafficked victims. With the fall in clients, sex workers are forced to say yes to dangerous clients and services they would otherwise say no to, just to survive. Sex workers are often living under multiple forms of marginalisation. Over-represented groups include women, single [mothers](#), [migrants](#), [people of colour](#), [disabled people](#), [LGBT people](#), and people who have experienced [poverty and homelessness](#).

While wealthier sex workers may emerge unscathed, it will be marginalised groups who, facing destitution, are [forced](#) to take on [worse, more dangerous](#) work.

Nordic Model advocates lean on the provision of 'exit services'. But in reality, these exit services don't exist, or they make their support contingent on anti-sex worker ideology. This includes refusing to offer realistic harm reduction methods, such as condoms. In Ireland, Nordic Model supporters acknowledge that "[there is no evidence that these things are in place in Ireland](#)". In France, two years after the law was enacted, the committees that were supposed to oversee exit programmes [were still not set up](#).

Criminalising sex workers' online presence is dangerous

[Evidence](#) shows that internet platforms have made working in the sex industry safer, allowing sex workers to share safety tips, lists of dangerous men, and screen potential clients. Despite claims by sex work prohibitionists that advertising websites only benefit third parties, online platforms allow more sex workers to work independently, taking control over their rates and services. Banning sex workers' online presence also removes peer support and prevents labour organisation, resulting in an increase in the isolation of sex workers.

When the United States introduced the 2018 FOSTA/SESTA laws, online advertising platforms were shut down. Sex workers abruptly faced financial precarity; many were pushed into unsafe or exploitative working conditions. Many reported that the loss of their online presence made them more susceptible to labour exploitation and trafficking, or forced them to work outdoors. [Research](#) shows that the introduction of SESTA/FOSTA led to an increase in poverty, insecure housing, [suicide, murder](#), isolation, and the deterioration of physical and mental health. Various sex worker-led organisations have [spoken out](#) about the dangers of FOSTA/SESTA.

According to [one researcher](#): "[FOSTA/SESTA] has created an environment where marginalised populations are pushed into increased financial insecurity, which, in turn, makes them more vulnerable to labour exploitation and trafficking in the sex industry."

We, the undersigned, call on MPs to take into account evidence about the harms caused by 'Nordic Model' style laws. We oppose any legislation which increases the criminalisation of prostitution by criminalising the purchase of sex or by closing down the online sites where sex workers advertise.

SIGNATORIES

Decrim Now

Amnesty International UK

GMB

Freedom United

Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants (JCWI)

LGBT+ Labour

Liberty

Momentum

Sisters Uncut

Stonewall

The Communication Workers Union (CWU)

United Voices of the World (UVW)

University and College Union (UCU)

A Way Out

Abortion Rights Campaign (ARC)

Aedan Wolton, Social Worker, TransPlus (Chelsea & Westminster Hospital NHS FT)

All Black Lives UK

Alliance for Choice

Amelia Horgan, Writer

Associação ComuniDária - Portugal

Associated Society of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen (ASLEF)

Bakers, Food, and Allied Workers Union (BFAWU)

Baroness Natalie Bennett, Green Party

Basingstoke Mutual Aid

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Callum Crouch, Healthcare Assistant (GUM/HIV care), 56 Dean Street Soho (Chelsea & Westminster NHS Trust)

Centre for Labour and Social Studies (CLASS)

Chardine Taylor-Stone, Black Feminist, Trade unionist and writer

Cleaners and Allied Independent Workers Union (CAIWU)

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Daisy Cooper MP, Liberal Democrats

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Emily Kenway, author of "The Truth about Modern Slavery"

Emily Thompson, Staff nurse, Chelsea and Westminster

English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP)

Esra Arıkan Solidarity Network

Feminist Fightback

FKA Twigs, singer

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Freddy McConnell, writer and journalist

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Gendered Intelligence

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Global Alliance against Traffic in Women (GAATW)

Global Justice Bloc

Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP)

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GRT Socialists

Hannah Russell, Doctor, Chelsea & Westminster NHS Foundation Trust

Hannah Witton, Author and Sex and Relationships content creator

Haringey Anti Raids

Haringey Welcome

Health Liberation Now!

HIV Scotland

Inclusive Mosque Initiative

International Committee on the Rights of Sex Workers Europe (ICRSE)

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James Hardie, St Stephen's Centre Clinic Manager, John Hunter Clinic for Sexual Health

Jamie Stone MP, Liberal Democrat

Jason Domino, Health campaigner

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Josie Long

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Labour Black Socialists

Labour Campaign for Free Movement

Labour Coalition for Justice Reform

Labour for a Green New Deal

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LGBT+ Liberal Democrats

LGBTQIA Greens

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Momentum

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National Union of Students - Union of Students in Ireland (NUS-USI)

National Union of Students (NUS)

North East Sex Work Forum

North London Food Not Bombs

Open Labour

Pink Therapy

POW Nottingham

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Prisoner Solidarity Network

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Prof. Nicola Mai, University of Newcastle Australia

Queer Strike

Radical Association in the LibDems

Rebecca Long-Bailey MP, Labour MP for Salford and Eccles

Reclaim the Night Leeds

Red Fightback

Red Umbrella Sweden

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Samantha Kavanagh, Patient care coordinator, Chelsea and Westminster NHS trust

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The F-Word

The Josephine Butler Society

The Radical Association in the Liberal Democrats

Tipping Point UK

Trans Safety Network

Traveller LGBT Pride

Ugly Mugs Ireland

UK Democratic Socialists of America (UK DSA)

Umbrella Lane

Women Against Rape (WAR)

Women of Colour - Global Women's Strike (GWS)

Women's Strike Assembly

World Jewish Relief

x:talk

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Young Scots for Independence

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Belfast Feminist Network

Bent Bars Project

Bottoming: the LGBTQ+ mental health podcast

Collective Action London

Cooperation Town

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Dr Polly Galis, University of Bristol

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The Gemini Project

The Haldane Society of Socialist Lawyers

The Lioness Pride (The Lioness Circle)

The Love Tank CIC

The Men's Room

The Rainbow Project

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