

# Sex workers won't report crimes for fear of being prosecuted

Last week the *Post* reported on two aggravated burglaries in a Barking brothel, which led to the ordering of its closure. This week we speak to a women's rights organisation, which criticises the police handling of the case, and the police, who explain the legal dilemma of helping victims

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A leading police officer has vowed to improve relationships with sex workers after a women's organisation criticised the police response to the reporting of a burglary at a brothel.

Niki Adams, of Legal Action for Women, wrote to the borough commander complaining about the police's handling of an alleged aggravated burglary on December 6 at a house in Victoria Road, Barking, used by sex workers. The burglary was caught on video-sharing website YouTube.

Police are investigating the incident.

Cari Mitchell, from the English Collective of Prostitutes, said: "The main problem about women coming

forward to anybody to report a crime is fear about bringing themselves to the attention of the police."

She explained that the women, who she says were attacked in the brothel a year ago, sent police CCTV images and car registration numbers of the assailants, without hearing anything back from officers.

## Knife

Ms Mitchell said: "They were attacked again in the autumn but on that occasion they did not think it was worth reporting it."

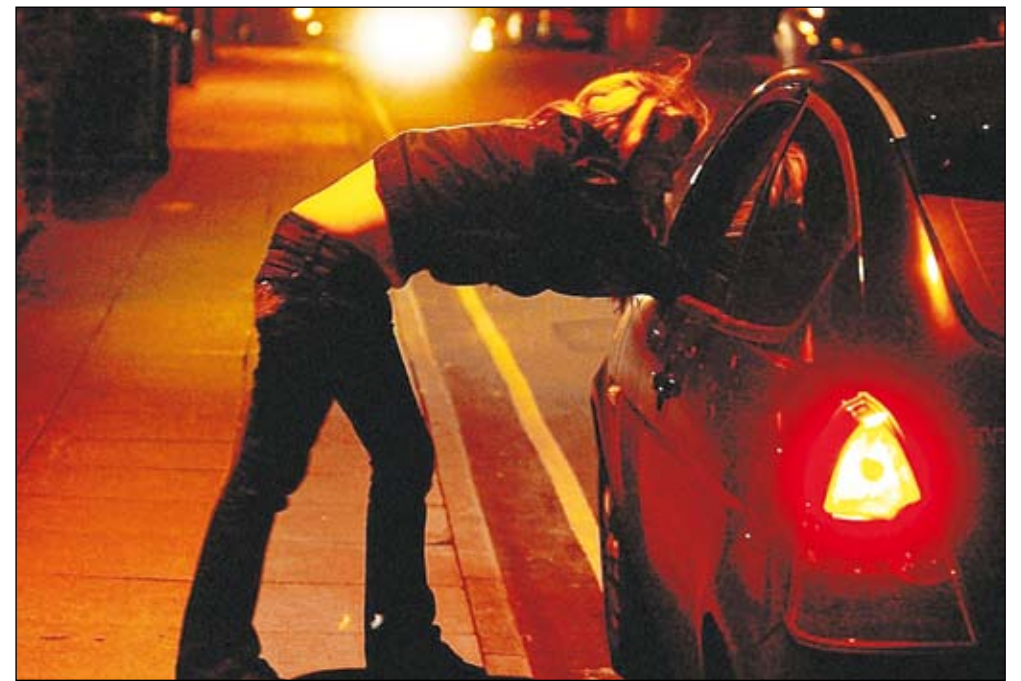
"On the third occasion a knife was used, and they felt they had to do something."

After the sex workers reported the attacks to police, they received a notice ordering them to stop using the building as a brothel or face

prosecution.

The collective believes such methods will deter women from reporting crimes.

Ms Mitchell continued: "Nobody in their right mind would report an attack now. Women are out there supporting themselves and their families – they just can't af-



■ Kerb-crawling, soliciting and owning a brothel are all crimes

## The law

The English Collective of Prostitutes is campaigning for New Zealand-style decriminalisation of all sex work.

The exchange of sexual services is not a crime in the UK. Related activities, however, such as soliciting in a public place, kerb-crawling, owning or managing a brothel and pimping are crimes.

If two or more prostitutes operate from an indoor premises, it is

considered a brothel.

There are currently two main debates around the reform of sex legislation in the UK – to either

follow the example of countries such as Germany, The Netherlands and New Zealand where prostitution has been legalised, or to follow the example of Nordic countries such as Sweden, Norway and Iceland, where it is illegal to pay for sex.

ford to be prosecuted, to be criminalised and to have that security taken away."

Insp Richard Thomas, from Barking and Dagenham Safer Neighbourhood Team, also believes that the current legislation is causing a dilemma.

He said: "This is a very difficult area. "In one breath they want to report the crime, in the next breath they are afraid that they will be prosecuted."

"It's a grey area. We can only work with the law that's put before us."

Ms Mitchell suggested police could use their discretion not to prosecute women by weighing up the benefits to individuals and to the community.

Insp Thomas said: "I think the important bit that we

must get across is that any crime that's reported by any person in the borough will be treated seriously.

"We would like to encourage any victim to report a crime."

"At this stage, it's about reassurance."

"We want everyone to be safe in this borough. The next step is about visiting those people and making sure they are safe."

"We have to understand exactly what's going on and engage with the girls by building a closer relationship with them. I'm sure that they will come forward and report crimes."



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