

English Collective of Prostitutes

SUBMISSION TO THE MODERN SLAVERY REVIEW

By the English Collective of Prostitutes 020 7482 2496

www.prostitutescollective.net

The English Collective of Prostitutes (ECP) is a self-help organisation of sex workers, working both on the street and in premises, with a national network throughout the UK. Since 1975, we have campaigned for the decriminalisation of prostitution, for sex workers' rights and safety, and for resources to enable people to get out of prostitution if they want to.

Some of the women in the English Collective of Prostitutes' network would fit the description of a victim trafficked into sexual exploitation – that is someone who is brought to the UK, held against their will and threatened or coerced to provide sexual services for somebody else's profit. In every case the women weren't "saved" by others, they escaped through their own ingenuity, courage and organising skills.

A recent All Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution Inquiry concluded that the trafficking of women into the sex industry is happening on an "industrial scale". This is not true. A 2011 ESRC study of migrant sex workers found less than 6% had been trafficked, many said they prefer working in the sex industry rather than the "unrewarding and sometimes exploitative conditions they meet in non-sexual jobs".

This is reflected in our own experience organising for sex worker rights and safety. At the time when the police were repeating claims that *"every single foreign woman in the 'walk-up' flats in Soho had been smuggled into the country and forced to work as a prostitute"* we were holding meetings in the basement of a café, of over 60 women who worked in the area, to organise against raids and deportations. Women spoke out in Parliament, met the local vicar, and gave interviews to the press about how *"being foreign doesn't mean we are forced"*.

Our concerns are two fold

1. Despite millions of pounds of funding, victims of trafficking get little or no help from the authorities.

Of the women in our network who fit the description of a trafficked victim – that is someone who is brought to the UK, held against their will and threatened or coerced to provide sexual services for somebody else's profit, none were "saved" by others, they escaped through their own ingenuity, courage and organising skills.

Example: two sisters who came to London from rural Moldova, where the family had *"no running water, or gas for heating"*, were promised work in a restaurant. They told us how *"after a week the men said we must earn our keep by sleeping with other men. They beat us and said we would never see each other again if we tried to leave."* They escaped by recruiting help from the receptionist in the flat where they

worked, who squirrelled away some money. They both faked illness on the same day and ran. They refused to go to the police because they didn't want to be sent back. We came to us instead and we found them emergency housing for a few days. Eventually one sister got a job as a stripper so they could afford a market rent.

We have at least 10 examples like that: the woman who cultivated a relationship with a bigger gangster than the one holding her, who supported her to get her passport back. The young woman who jumped out of a car at the petrol station and was sitting on our women's centre doorstep when we arrived in the morning. We helped her claim asylum and she was detained for travelling on false documents. It was our campaigning with Black Women's Rape Action Project that got her out.

2. Raids and arrests in the name of anti-trafficking isolate sex workers and make it harder for women to come forward to report exploitation, rape and other violence. Therefore this police and government policy is exacerbating trafficking.

A 2014 survey found that where arrests of sex workers and clients were high, only 5 per cent of sex workers who were victims of a crime reported it. This compared to 46 per cent of victims in areas where police adopted a harm reduction approach. (4)

Critically, our experience shows that when sex workers report violence they often face prosecution themselves while little is done to catch their attackers.

Example, One woman in our group was recently robbed at knifepoint in a flat in Enfield where she was working with others. When she reported it, the police didn't treat her as a victim, seemed half-hearted in their investigation and instead returned to the premises to deliver a letter saying, "any female at this address now, who is found at this same address in the future, is very likely to be arrested [for brothel-keeping]".ⁱ

In our experience trafficking is enabled by poverty and women's determination to escape it. And it is enabled by the hostile immigration environment that make it impossible for women to cross international borders unaided. Once in the UK, sex work can be the best or only option to prevent destitution.

Traffickers escape prosecution not because of a lack of applicable laws, but as with domestic violence and rape, because protecting women is not the priority. Women Against Rape points to the appalling 6% and 5% conviction rates for reported rape and domestic violence. More often than not when sex workers report violence, the police refuse to act and may even threaten to prosecute them instead for prostitution offences.

An effective anti-trafficking strategy has to strengthen women's hands. Decriminalising sex work would enable women who work in the sex industry to insist on the same labour rights as other workers and report violence without fear of arrest. Ending the hostile immigration environment and ensuring that women have access

to money and resources so that they can feed themselves and their families would make them less vulnerable to those ready to exploit them.

ⁱ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2017/aug/03/police-sex-workers-brothel-thieves-london-keir-starmer#img-1>