



All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Roundtable meeting on service provision for women involved in
commercial sexual exploitation

Minutes

Date: Tuesday 9th March 2021

Time: 3.00pm – 4.30pm

Location: Zoom

Participants

Rt Hon Diane Abbott MP

Kat Banyard - Director, UK Feminista

Oliver Bennathan - Office of Lyn Brown MP

Claire Coutinho MP

Ronnie Cowan MP

Helena Croft – Director, Streetlight UK

Lynda Dearlove – CEO, Women@thewell

Kelly Grehan – Office of David Lammy MP

Ellie Hall – Office of Tulip Siddiq MP

Heather Harvey – Head of Research and Campaigns, Nia

Sali Harwood - Manager, SWWOP

Jonas Helyar – Office of Dr Ben Spencer MP

Izzy Hunter-Fajardo – Office of Gillian Keegan MP

Dame Diana Johnson MP (Chair)

Adam Lehodey – Office of Crispin Blunt MP

Gabriela Salva Macallan – Office of Apsana Begum MP

Diane Martin CBE – Survivor and exiting practitioner

Ruth Robb - CEO, Azalea

Lauren Vargues - Survivor, Co-founder of Serenity & Serpent, member of You My Sister

Bernadette Waddelove – Office of Fiona Bruce MP

Kate Winstanley – Office of Dame Diana Johnson MP

Apologies

Sarah Champion MP

Thangam Debbonaire MP

Rt Hon Maria Miller MP

Dame Diana Johnson MP: Asked participants to provide brief introductions about themselves and their organisations.

Sali Harwood: Sali Harwood has been the manager of Sheffield Working Women's Opportunities Project (SWWOP) since 1996, a service which provides support to women involved in on-street and indoor prostitution. The service has also recently started supporting women involved in the online sex trade.

Diane Martin CBE: A survivor of prostitution and sex trafficking, Diane Martin has supported women to exit prostitution over the past 25 years, including through developing an exiting prostitution one-stop-shop project in the London Borough of Lambeth. Following this, she founded the Dovetail Initiative which seeks to improve policy and practise relating to prostitution. Diane Martin also recently joined the OSCE's inaugural International Survivors of Trafficking Council.

Lynda Dearlove: Lynda Dearlove is the CEO of Women@thewell, a frontline service that supports women towards exiting prostitution. The organisation provides a drop-in service in the Kings Cross area of London and outreach is also provided across London for women involved in on-street and indoor prostitution. Outreach support is provided by workers who speak the language of the service user.

Helena Croft: Helena Croft is the Director of Streetlight UK, a frontline service operating across London, Surrey and Sussex providing harm reduction and exiting prostitution support. The organisation also runs a deterring reoffending course for men seeking to buy sex on-street in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The course is also being rolled out in the London boroughs of Newham and Enfield. In 2020 the organisation engaged with over 4400 women and provided direct support to 400 women and transgender people. The greatest number of Streetlight's referrals are self-referrals via the internet or outreach. The organisation incorporates service user voices into service provision.

Ruth Robb: Ruth Robb is the CEO and Co-founder of Azalea. The service has remained open and expanded during COVID-19 to provide a therapeutic response to the high levels of violence against women during the pandemic.

Heather Harvey: Heather Harvey is the Head of Research and Campaigns at Nia, a frontline organisation supporting 1500-2000 women and girls per year experiencing all forms of violence against women and girls. This includes specialist support for women involved in prostitution and sex trafficking, with a focus on exiting prostitution. The organisation provides specialist refuge, night-time outreach, group work and casework, and has recently started to deliver outreach to women involved in indoor prostitution. Heather Harvey has also led primary research with women involved in prostitution in her role at Nia and in her previous role at Eaves, in conjunction with London Southbank University. The research informs the training and practise of the service.

Lauren Vargues: A survivor of prostitution and sex trafficking, Lauren Vargues recently co-founded Serenity & Serpent, a survivor's cooperative offering specialist consultation and training on effective service provision for women involved in the sex

trade and child sexual exploitation victims. Lauren also delivers a post-exit wellbeing recovery course with You My Sister.

Dame Diana Johnson MP: What are the support needs of women currently involved in prostitution and/or those seeking to exit prostitution? What constitutes best practice in supporting women to exit prostitution?

Sali Harwood: SWWOP provides regular street outreach - including the provision of condoms, clothing, food, information, reports of violent sex buyers and needle exchange services. The service also provides in-house sexual health screening, support accessing housing, social services, health and drug and alcohol services, crisis support (e.g. support with pregnancy, court cases and assaults) and support for women leaving prison. Good practise involves building trusting relationships with service users.

Diane Martin CBE: A non-judgemental one-stop-shop enables women to receive support with multiple issues simultaneously, such as support with housing, mental health, substance use and coercive control. This avoids women undergoing re-assessment by multiple different services which is re-traumatising. Exiting support needs to be provided on a long-term basis to ensure a sustainable exit.

“The exit needs to be sustainable otherwise we’ll just be setting women up to fail in a kind of constant revolving door.”

Services need to be women-centred, women-only and must recognise that prostitution is a form of violence against women and girls.

“Working within a framework that recognises prostitution as violence against women and girls is crucial.”

Separating trafficking and prostitution is a false dichotomy. Also, surrounding issues have a big impact on services and it is important to adopt legislation that decriminalises women involved in prostitution, criminalises sex buyers and ensures provision of support services for women involved in the sex trade. Criminal convictions for soliciting are a barrier to exiting prostitution. Uncertainty of funding is extremely challenging for services.

“Funding is crucial... with many of the agencies that’ll know that it is often at the eleventh hour when they even find out if they’re getting re-funded. That causes great stress and uncertainty.”

Lynda Dearlove: Echoed Diane Martin CBE’s comments. A one-size-fits-all approach will not work because services must meet and be led by the individual support needs of women, which are the factors that entrench women in the sex trade. Unspent convictions for soliciting are a significant barrier to exiting. When women attempt to leave the sex trade they are faced with enhanced DBS checks when applying for many types of employment.

It is also important to adopt a trauma-informed perspective and recognise the multiple layers of trauma that women are experiencing. Support provision must be long-term and recognise that women often need to return to support services multiple times as the exiting journey is not linear.

“This isn’t a quick fix. None of this works if you’re working from a perspective of six weeks of interventions or sixteen weeks of interventions.”

It is also important to enable trusting relationships between women and support workers without building dependencies. Support services need to act as a conduit to other types of support services to surround women with the required support, to enable them to see choices and alternatives that at first may not be visible to them.

“The choice to exit prostitution, for many women, doesn’t appear to be a real choice because they can’t see it or identify it. So part of what you’re doing... is actually having those conversations that begin to make the hope of something different possible and then to work with women to identify that and to create the possibilities.”

Helena Croft: Echoed comments made by Lynda Dearlove and Diane Martin CBE. It is very important to provide a framework that recognises the violence at the heart of prostitution. COVID-19 has had a significant impact on this vulnerable group of women as women’s needs, such as substance abuse and homelessness, have been hugely exacerbated. Streetlight has observed an increase in violence, a murder, an attempted murder and multiple suicide attempts during the pandemic. Women who have been trapped in the UK due to lockdown have been forced into prostitution.

Services must be women-centred and women-led and staff must be specialist in providing trauma-informed support. There also must be a consistent approach across all service types including police and local authorities. Signposting must also be very clear.

Heather Harvey: Agreed with previous contributions. Every woman is different so support must be tailored to the risks, needs and aspirations of each individual. Exiting is not a linear journey. Harm minimisation services are important and can provide a gateway into exiting services but there must be funding for specialist exiting services which recognise the gendered nature of prostitution.

“Very often women involved in prostitution may well come to the attention of homelessness services or drug and alcohol services in particular, and again they do their best by the women, but to be honest if you’re not dealing with prostitution as an issue and as a gendered issue around women’s rights and equality and

discrimination then I don't think you can provide the right sort of help. You need some specialist skills."

Women involved in prostitution often distrust services due to their experiences and women need to be met where they are rather than requesting that women meet the needs of the services.

Services must build trust, whilst setting strict boundaries. Women involved in prostitution face racism, sexism and stigma, and often are blamed for their experiences by statutory services. Specialist services should play an advocacy role. Funding for services needs to be flexible to recognise the complexity of service user needs. Heather Harvey shared a story of a service user who had her hair shaved off by a pimp and therefore felt unable to leave the house to engage with support services. The woman's support worker bought a wig for her and for herself to build trust and enable the woman to leave the house. Many funders do not recognise the need to provide funding for such items.

Lauren Vargues: Agreed with previous contributions. It is important to fund properly trained key workers who are not overloaded with cases so that they can build in-depth relationships with women. Services need to operate as a hub to support women to access other services which can otherwise be challenging for women experiencing trauma to access. Services need to be a 'blank canvas' for women's needs, equipped with a full toolset to be adopted when appropriate.

"Realistically, services need to operate as a hub for the basic needs – housing, benefits, legal advice for criminal proceedings, physical and mental health support. These are really key needs that the majority of women accessing these services are going to be in desperate need of and expecting them to put in leg work to get it is going to be out of reach for a lot of women."

Rt Hon Diane Abbott MP: Should policy makers respond to commercial sexual exploitation by implementing the 'Nordic Model'¹? How should policy makers respond to unspent soliciting convictions?

Sali Harwood: Expressed support for the Nordic model.

Helena Croft: The Nordic model is important because it defines prostitution as a form of violence against women. There is 20 years of research about Sweden's law, debunking myths about the legislation. The UK needs an enhanced model.

"For us, shifting the burden of blame off of the women and onto those who really do have a choice, which is predominantly men"

¹ The 'Nordic Model', otherwise known as 'demand reduction legislation', tackles demand for prostitution and sex trafficking by criminalising paying for sex, decriminalising and providing support to people involved in the sex trade, and holding third-party exploiters to account.

that are purchasing sex, I think that is where I would like to see the burden of the law shift.”

During lockdown, men were choosing to buy sex from women forced into prostitution to be able to afford food to survive.

Heather Harvey: The Centre for Women’s Justice has been supporting a group of women who were sexually exploited as teenagers to demand that women’s soliciting convictions are sealed or wiped immediately and to advocate that there should be a mechanism to secure this. The latest court case found that the general principle of having a criminal record was important and that existing disclosure mechanisms should prevent records from being disclosed. However, enhanced criminal record checks and the length of time records are held mean that these records are still at risk of disclosure. Women should not be criminalised for selling sex in the first place.

Ronnie Cowan MP: Asked Helena Croft about Streetlight’s perpetrator programme.

Helena Croft: Streetlight wrote the ‘You Choose’ course which was a deterring reoffending course designed for men who have been arrested for kerb crawling. 80 men have attended the course over the past two years with a 98% success rate.

Ronnie Cowan MP: Asked how services are funded and whether any services presently receive Government funding.

Lauren Vargues: Part of Lauren’s work with a charity is funded by private donors but this tenure has only been funded for six months, despite feedback that the course has changed women’s lives.

Heather Harvey: Nia receives some limited Government funding via local authorities, however most funding is provided by the National Lottery and Comic Relief. Brent Council is providing some funding as they are aiming to address the demand for prostitution. London Councils provides some funding via the Ascent consortium (which is a group of approximately 20 organisations that provide violence against women services) for one-to-one support for women in South East London.

Helena Croft: Most of Streetlight’s statutory funding is provided by the Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) or Police and Crime Commissioners’ offices. Helena Croft welcomes today’s discussion as services like Streetlight do not fall neatly into one sector, so it is not obvious where the funding should come from. All charities are struggling to find funding and much of it is short-term. Long-term, specialist funding for exiting services must be part of the Government’s plan and it seems obvious to link it to the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

Heather Harvey: Local authorities will only fund exiting services when they recognise prostitution as a form of violence against women. The lack of framework from central Government affects local authority responses.

“If you view prostitution as a form of discrimination and inequality and violence, then you’re going to invest in exiting. If you view it as, you know, harmless - or as work like any other or something to which you need to not engage too much - then why would you invest in exiting? I think the lack of a clear framework or strategy or policy aspiration from central Government trickles all the way down into local authorities and local policing...”

Lynda Dearlove: If central Government takes a position, it will no longer be left to local authorities to decide whether or not support for women involved in prostitution is a priority and whether local residents view it as a priority. France’s Nordic model legislation is the best legislation as it recognises prostitution as a form of violence against women and provides funding for women’s services, and also provides protection for women with insecure immigration status.

Diane Martin CBE: Policy from central Government which frames prostitution as a form of violence against women is crucial so that provision is not dependent on the individual opinion of particular Police and Crime Commissioners or local authority staff, which can then change when they leave their role. Diane Martin CBE previously worked with Lambeth Council to adopt a prostitution policy based on Glasgow Council’s policy which moved from focusing on criminal justice to health and exiting.

Lauren Vargues: Prostitution often overlaps other social issues that governments are looking to tackle such as addiction and low-level crime.

“In the brothel, I was the only British-born woman. Everyone else was a migrant woman, slipping under the radar with no recourse to public funds... they are ripe for exploitation.”

Claire Coutinho MP: Interested in more information on how support needs sit across multiple services and the Nordic model.

Ruth Robb: Azalea has remained open and expanded during COVID-19. The service has seen an increase in violence against women and an increase in activity around Luton airport so they have been providing therapeutic assistance. Home Office figures show that international sex trafficking increased by 25%-30% in 2020. The service has been working in collaboration with the police and has been involved in 12 warrants during 2020 which has been successful.

Dame Diana Johnson MP: How else should parliamentarians respond?

Lauren Vargues: All government agencies should be required to undergo comprehensive training on assessing and responding to commercial sexual exploitation. Lauren shared her experience of disclosing that she was being sexually

exploited at 17 years old to her GP, who frightened her away. A crucial opportunity was missed to support her to exit the exploitative situation.

Heather Harvey: Agreed with Lauren Vargues' comments. It is crucial to provide long-term funding for specialist, women-only exiting services to enable organisations to meet the needs of women. Housing provision is also critically important, as women need safe housing and some income to be able to focus on the changes they want to make in their lives. Women involved in the sex trade are often turned away from refuges and are at high risk of being evicted from refuges due to the addictions they have as coping mechanisms for trauma. Additionally, appropriate and affordable follow-on accommodation after staying in a refuge is crucial. Mixed-sex accommodation fails women involved in prostitution as it is not safe for them.

“Letting women go into mixed-sex hostels is a recipe for disaster, it’s an absolute abdication of responsibility. It’s a breach of states’ human rights obligations to these women.”

The Domestic Abuse Bill has attempted to exclude migrant women who are disproportionately affected by this issue. Safe peer support is also important to provide.

Lauren Vargues: Sexual exploitation is rife in local authority hostels for children leaving care, so legislation must consider how looked after children are supported appropriately.

Lynda Dearlove: Women-only provision is important as women are often blamed for things, particularly in drug and alcohol provision, when someone else has triggered them due to their experiences. The majority of women in the sex trade have learnt to live with ‘chaos’ and this needs to be understood as a disability. To enable full time employment, women must not be limited by the system, including the social welfare system. Rapid reforms to such systems will benefit other social groups too. Members of the APPG can visit Women@thewell when lockdown ends.

Helena Croft: There is an increasing number of women involved in online commercial sexual exploitation and Streetlight is currently undertaking a piece of work on the isolation and mental health experiences of this group. When Streetlight raise the issue of online sexual exploitation, no definitive answer is provided as to how the issue will be tackled by the Government. Online platforms such as Vivastreet and Adultwork are collaborating with bodies such as the Home Office in a way that gives them credibility.

It is also problematic that housing services only work standard office hours so this support is currently inaccessible on night-time outreach and would require another level of funding to make it accessible.

Diane Martin CBE: Funders and the Government need to look at existing good practise where positive sustained outcomes are achieved, which is more cost-

effective. Despite it taking time and the need to address multiple issues, women do successfully exit prostitution. Ring-fenced funding should be provided, and governments and funders should work with services to develop the best monitoring systems, as often funding requirements do not recognise the nature of providing exiting support services. Women-centred specialist services are regularly losing out on funding to generic non-specialist providers.

“A lot of the women that come into services, there’s just been a catalogue of being let down, often from childhood. So we also need to [be] looking at the roots of sexual exploitation, but to recognise the wealth of knowledge about how to support women and girls who are victims of the horrors of prostitution, and to resource the agencies that have got a proven track record in this work. We need our leaders to challenge the systems and institutions that keep women entrenched in prostitution and create barriers when women are trying to rebuild their lives.”

Lynda Dearlove: Funding needs to enable creative solutions. Women@thewell pay for hotels for women who are street-homeless at night when housing services are closed. Lynda shared an example of working with the housing benefit department and a hotel to safely house a woman when there were no other available options. Alongside this, subsistence support was provided. The woman’s mental and physical health improved substantially as a result.

Dame Diana Johnson MP had to leave the meeting for parliamentary business. Kat Banyard of UK Feminista, which provides the Secretariat for the APPG on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, chaired the remainder of the meeting.

Kat Banyard: What does good and bad practise look like when providing support services? What policy framework should the Government adopt in relation to the sex trade?

Lauren Vargues: The only potential benefit of the Government funding services which view prostitution as a form of work is that some women want to access harm minimisation services but are reluctant to engage with services that recognise prostitution as a form of sexual exploitation. However, this is different for women wishing to exit prostitution and the Government may be endorsing the idea that prostitution can be made safe and can be considered a form of work by funding such services. The Government needs to carefully consider the message they are sending out and consider any benefit of funding such organisations.

In terms of policy, selling sex should be decriminalised as a minimum. Women would not be criminalised for being victims of any other form of violence. The purchase of sex and third-party profiteering should be criminalised. Brothel managers are pimps, despite attempts to appear otherwise. Sexual exploitation needs to be recognised as

a serious crime and perpetrators should go on the sex offenders register. Ring-fenced funding must be provided to support women to exit sustainably.

Helena Croft: The Government could ensure a consistent approach across all local authorities. Better collaboration across statutory services would be beneficial. The Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy is a key framework to enable this consistency of message.

Ruth Robb: Work with sex buyers is important as it addresses the root cause of the issue. Harm reduction services can sometimes be a step towards recovery and exiting, however women must be offered the choice to exit. More often than not, harm reduction services keep women trapped in sexual exploitation and enable them to remain in the sex trade. The role of support services is to create an environment where women know they have choice, and they are not disempowered to stay within the sex trade. Azalea's research revealed that many women they support are fifth and sixth generation victims of sex trafficking, so it is difficult to move forward, as they have had no alternative modelled to them and are products of their experiences.

“Funding projects that are not passionate about recovery and transformation is part of the problem.”

Lynda Dearlove: Bad practise is where services prescribe to women what they think women need, work on their time frame as opposed to that of the woman, and model a one-size-fits-all generic package that doesn't recognise the individual needs of women.

“This is about provision that really is part of the solution, that moves the women out of the entrapment of the sex trade, that gives them choices.”

Changing attitudes through training in the police, medical professions, social work and teaching is important to prevent exploitation repeating itself. Due to the labelling and prejudice in systems, victims of child sexual exploitation have not been believed or have been treated badly in the past.

Ronnie Cowan MP: Interested to discuss whether universal basic income could play a role in this issue.