RECOMMENDATIONS BY MPs TO DECRIMINALISE SEX WORKERS COMMENDED BY NATIONAL SAFETY CHARITY

Friday 1 July, 2016

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National Ugly Mugs (NUM), a multi-award winning safety charity which supports an estimated 15,000 sex workers in the UK, have welcomed the Home Affairs Select Committee report on Prostitution published today (1st July 2016) which recommends that sex workers should not be criminalised for working on the street or working together in indoor premises. NUM worked closely with the Select Committee and their written evidence was referenced throughout the report.

Alex Feis-Bryce, NUM Chief Executive and member of the National Police Working Group on Sex Work, said: “I welcome this report that recognises the diversity of the sex industry and the rights of sex workers to work safely. The Committee have demonstrated a real understanding of the academic research in this area and have not succumbed to the pervasive myths perpetuated by those who base their views on ideology and not evidence. It is reassuring that the Committee remain unconvinced that criminalising the purchase of sex, as introduced in Northern Ireland, reduces demand or improves the lives of sex workers. The recognition of decriminalisation, as in New Zealand, as a model which has improved working conditions is a huge step forward in recognising the rights of sex workers to public protection.’’

“We implore the Government to take heed of their recommendations and, in particular, allow sex workers to work together in collectives for their own safety, and to remove soliciting offences from the statute books. Sex workers in the UK are currently a marginalised group who are unlikely to report to the police if they are victims of crime, and the existing legislation entrenches their marginalisation and legitimises the stigma many of them face on a daily basis.”

The concerns of the Committee reflect the findings of a recent survey of over 200 sex workers by NUM which found that 96% of sex workers said clients should not be criminalised; and 82% of sex workers said that criminalising clients would make them feel less safe.

Dr. Mary Laing, Senior Lecturer in Criminology at Northumbria University who commissioned the survey said: “It is encouraging that the Committee have listened to the voices of sex workers and recognise the potential dangerous impacts of criminalising clients; further criminalisation would only serve to exacerbate the marginalisation and stigmatisation of sex workers.”

More from the report:

The report also recognises the importance of distinguishing between sex trafficking and consensual commercial sex: “Trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation is an important and separate issue from prostitution between consenting adults.”

The report expressed reservations about the so-called buyer’s law, as introduced in Sweden in 1999, Norway in 2009 and Northern Ireland in 2015:

“..the sex buyer law makes no attempt to discriminate between prostitution which occurs between two consenting adults, and that which involves exploitation. Much of the rhetoric also denies sex workers the opportunity to speak for themselves and to make their own choices… We are not yet convinced that the sex buyer law would be effective in reducing demand or in improving the lives of sex workers… there are indications that the law can be misused to harass and victimise sex workers, who are the very people whom the law is seeking to protect.”

In contrast, the report expressed a positive view about the evidence they have received about decriminalisation, as introduced in New Zealand in 2003:

“We have received evidence that the model of decriminalisation implemented in New Zealand has worked successfully. Research suggests that it has resulted in a number of benefits, including a clear policy message, better conditions for sex workers, improved cooperation between sex workers and the police, and no detectable increase in the size of the sex industry or exploitation of sex workers.”

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