

Towards Safer Sex Work

Conference notes that:

- A. “Sex work” encompasses a broad span of commercial activity that includes phone-line operators, webcam broadcasters, actors in the adult entertainment industry, escorts, and indoor as well as outdoor sex workers;
- B. Prostitution in itself is legal but many of the related activities, such as solicitation and brothel-keeping, are criminalised;
- C. The decriminalisation of sex work has been Liberal Democrat policy since the 1994 publication of Policy Paper 3: “Confronting Prostitution”;
- D. Sex workers are comprised of people in a variety of economic situations or from marginalised groups, including single mothers, students, men who have sex with men, and transgender people saving so they can access adequate medical care;
- E. Many sex workers engage in the trade of their own volition without economic coercion, often as a way to ensure financial stability and even wealth completely on their own terms;
- F. Peer-reviewed high quality academic research, along with senior medical practitioners in the delivery of NHS sexual health services, provide strong evidence for decriminalisation;
- G. States such as New Zealand have moved to a policy of decriminalisation of sex work with success in terms of the safety of sex workers where it has reduced cases of violence against sex workers;
- H. Sex workers in New Zealand are allowed to work together and organise themselves in the way they see fit, can protect their safety much better, have more trust and a better relationship with the police which is more conducive to detecting and punishing abuses.
- I. In England, the “Merseyside Model” which treats violence against sex workers as a hate crime, has been implemented in several major cities, most notably Liverpool;
- J. That Amnesty International, from early 2014, engaged in a global consultation on sex work with a draft policy recommending decriminalisation, and at Amnesty’s UK annual general meeting, a motion in support of decriminalisation of sex work was “comfortably” carried.

Conference welcomes the work of Liberal Democrats:

1. In particular, the 2011 Home Office Review of Effective Practice in Responding to Prostitution, which was signed by Lynne Featherstone MP, as an Equalities Minister, which argued for:
 - Safety to be made an overriding priority;
 - Translation services, ESL courses, and other language support for migrant sex workers;
 - Violence against sex workers to be treated as a hate crime, and;
 - A focus of resources against the grooming of young women in care homes.
2. In 2011, Lynne Featherstone MP additionally announced a £100,000 grant towards piloting an “Ugly Mugs” scheme aimed at protecting sex workers, in conjunction with the UK Network of Sex Projects;
3. Prior to being a governing party, the opposition by Liberal Democrat MPs alongside a coalition of sex workers against provisions in the Policing and Crime Act 2009 aimed towards criminalising some aspects of sex work and working conditions brought by a majority Labour government.

Conference expresses concern that:

- I. Laws regarding solicitation and loitering force sex workers into isolated areas where they are at more danger of sexual and physical violence;
- II. Laws prohibiting brothel-keeping prevent sex workers from working out of the same premises to ensure their own safety;
- III. Raids of saunas in Edinburgh and London were orchestrated with publicity in mind — including inviting the press to the raids in Soho in December 2013 — rather than for the welfare and privacy of the women in sex work;
- IV. Studies promoting the criminalisation of clients or “demand” often conflate legal migrants of an ethnic minority background with trafficked women in a way that is tantamount to racism;
- V. Approaches which criminalise the purchase of sexual services but not, overtly, the workers themselves — criminalise otherwise law abiding people, and divert criminal justice resources away from serious harms in society, including young people in care homes at risk of grooming, victims of trafficking, and migrant workers in domestic — and sometimes sexual — servitude;
- VI. The enforcement of the above approach in the ‘Nordic’ approach in Scandinavian countries had no appreciable effect in preventing violence against women or poverty, and has reduced negotiating power that street workers previously had;
- VII. Just as the criminalisation of homosexuality and abortion leads to unsafe practices regarding LGBT and women’s healthcare respectively, criminalisation of sex work leads to unsafe sexual health practices;
- VIII. Immigration status, and not the welfare of women suspected of being trafficked, is currently a priority within police forces;
- IX. Sex workers invariably fear state violence and police brutality more than they fear violence from people masquerading as clients, or from members of the public.

Conference believes:

- A. That laws against rape and sexual violence need to be strongly enforced, especially against people suspected of trafficking others;
- B. That there should be no bar towards consensual sexual activities between any number of adults;
- C. That every person has a right to bodily autonomy, and it is not for the State to decide what a they can or cannot do with their body, including engage in sex work if they so choose to;
- D. That the abolition of sex work is not practically feasible without fully eradicating circumstances related to economic hardship, and cannot be sought through any prohibition on consensual sex work;
- E. That decriminalisation of sex work would help engender better working conditions and sexual health practices among workers;
- F. That decriminalisation would also help foster a positive culture where the importance of informed and enthusiastic consent is paramount;
- G. That it is our responsibility as liberals to ensure that the most disadvantaged people in society are fought for just as hard as the least, and it is key that we should sometimes just amplify their voices instead of offering our own.

Conference calls for:

1. The continued support of the principles in Policy Paper 3 and the establishment of a Working Group to prepare an updated version of the policy paper that deals with the issue of sex work in the 21st Century, for discussion at Conference in the near future;
2. In the interim, oppose any steps to implement the Nordic model and to reaffirm our support of decriminalisation of sex work, protections for survivors of violence against women, and the promotion of safer sexual health practices and better sex and relationship ethics, including in all tiers of the education system;
3. The “Merseyside model”, in which crimes against sex workers are treated as hate crimes, to be rolled out nationwide;
4. The promotion of solutions to the problem of international trafficking and forced prostitution that do not endanger the lives of sex workers;
5. Work to be taken in conjunction with sex worker organisations to ensure the safety of workers, including reintroducing the Ugly Mugs scheme on a more permanent basis;
6. For our commitment for strong social and community safety nets to be reaffirmed, so that no person should be pressured to enter or be afraid to exit sex work at any time.