

## **GLA - London Assembly Conservative Group**

### **Concerns over the Police and Crime Plan's priorities around policing sex work**

#### Priorities

This Group is concerned that the current draft Police and Crime Plan only states, in regard to sex workers, that "There will be a renewed focus on targeting the demand side of prostitution and supporting work to help women exit prostitution."

Sex workers are believed to be at least 12 times more likely to be murdered than the national average. Approximately three quarters of those within this category will also be subjected to violence, assault and rape. If there are estimated to be 5100 brothel based sex workers and approximately 3200 street workers in London then that would suggest that over 6000 victims have experienced serious violent and sexual assault.

With this in mind, should the Plan's priority really be on reducing their client base? Should the plan rather be more victim-focused and target the more serious crimes around prostitution - by concentrating on encouraging sex workers to report crimes to the police?

We must focus on making sex workers safer rather than focusing on 'demand'. Human safety is usually considered an 'objective' human right, desired by almost everyone in London, whereas the desire to reduce demand is a subjective issue, disagreed upon in the UK.

Furthermore, the aim to 'help women exit prostitution' must work from a holistic angle. Evidence from charities and the Government suggests it can take up to seven years or longer for someone to completely exit prostitution once they decide they want to quit. Therefore even if our chief aim is to get everyone out of prostitution, we have to ensure that during those seven years when they are still prostitutes, they are safe, can report violence to the police, and have access to health services to ensure their well-being.

#### Tackling demand

Therefore getting people out of prostitution is not about tackling demand; it is first and foremost about accepting prostitution inevitably exists, and ensuring we keep sex workers safe long enough to be able to exit.

Criminalising demand simply removes vital income to support sex workers and their families during these seven years. Many sex workers will continue to sell sex either way, so by removing their 'legal' client base, you will also inevitably force them to take risks by going with more 'risky' clients, who they currently refuse to work with. It would also mean they are less safe because currently clients can report exploitation to the authorities, but under such laws clients would be less willing to do so.

#### Holistic approach

In Merseyside police focused less on the criminal aspects around prostitution and started working more holistically with them and service providers. This build-up of trust and holistic support led to a dramatic increase in the number of women leaving sex work (95% quit who they had worked with). This, rather than increased criminalisation of clients, appears to be the best way to reduce the number of women relying on sex work for income support.

MOPAC needs to base 'exit strategies;' on evidence. The lack of success of exit schemes in London and the success of the Merseyside scheme suggests that sex workers *choose* to exit when they feel holistically supported by authorities such as the police, NGOs and local authorities, not when they are simply ordered to join an exit scheme.

### Recommendations

Merseyside's work has been praised by both ACPO and the Home Office in their recent reports on this subject and MOPAC should therefore look to replicate such good practice in London. The Plan should promote joint strategic work between sex workers, police and service providers. The Conservative Group also recommends that MOPAC encourages police to manage crimes involving sex workers in a similar vein to the way Sapphire does – by prioritising victims of serious crime above the victim's own more minor misdemeanours.