



CONFERENCE REPORT

20<sup>th</sup> September 2025

Glasgow Grosvenor Hotel

The Scottish Women's Convention

# **Understanding the Prostitution Bill**



# Agnes Tolmie

## SWC Chair

Over the years, the Scottish Women's Convention held events on Male Violence against Women and Girls. These included conferences and roundtables on Trafficking, Misogyny, Domestic Abuse, Women for Sale, Sexualised Images and the Exploitation of Young Women. We also focused on women involved in prostitution, especially those who were trafficked, and are in a spiral of abuse and see no way out.

Previous work and failed attempts to pass legislation in the Scottish Parliament drove us to hold this conference on Understanding the Prostitution Bill (Ash Regan, MSP's Bill). Women in Scotland are fed up that after years and years and years, we are still discussing in 2025 whether prostitution is a job! Women are being subjected daily to sexual exploitation, and young women are often seen as easy targets for those profiting from the sex trade.

Women told the SWC they wanted answers to questions such as: Who are these men that are buying sex? Are they husbands, brothers, partners and sons?

We need to decide what kind of Scotland we want to live in. Do we want it to be one where women and girls are not commodities to be bought and sold, and free from male violence?

We need to ensure that we can make Scotland a safer place for our Women and Girls.

## 6 Key Points & Recommendations

- The Scottish Government's position is that prostitution is Violence Against Women and Girls (Equally Safe Strategy).
- Police Scotland support Ash Regan MSP's Bill.
- Support legislation that shifts criminal liability away from exploited individuals and onto those who create the demand for prostitution.
- Fund holistic support services across Scotland to help women exit prostitution.
- Pardon and expunge criminal records for those previously prosecuted for prostitution.
- Challenge the narrative that prostitution is a victimless or empowering choice

# Ash Regan MSP

Ash Regan MSP has been a member of the Scottish Parliament for Edinburgh Eastern since 2016. Initially elected to parliament for the Scottish National Party, she defected to the Alba Party in 2023. Prior to her time in government, Ash worked in digital marketing and was the Head of Campaigns and Advocacy at the Common Weal, a left-wing, pro-Scottish independence think tank.



Ash Regan provided a comprehensive overview of her ["Unbuyable Bill" \(Prostitution Offences and Support Scotland Bill\)](#).

She positioned the Bill as Scotland's version of the Nordic model, already implemented in Sweden, France, Ireland, and others. Regan detailed the bill's journey through Scottish Parliament and the broad support from police, COSLA, and civil society. She emphasised the reality of prostitution as gendered violence and exploitation, challenging narratives that present it as glamorous or empowering. Ash described the shift from street to indoor prostitution, the links to trafficking and organised crime, and the severe mental and physical harm suffered by women. She argued that criminalising buyers reduces demand, trafficking, and societal harm, urging attendees to press MSPs and parties for support. Ash also highlighted the cultural change needed, focusing on the attitudes of buyers and the failure of the state to protect women.

- "There's 4 main parts of the bill. The first part is that it criminalises the buyer and the buyers are majority men... The second, it decriminalises the sellers and the sellers are majority women... It then would offer support to those who are in or unhappy in prostitution, including support to exit. And it also...seeking to remove their previous convictions that women might have had for prostitution historically."
- "This collection of approaches towards prostitution is often described as the Nordic model... Sweden, Ireland, Northern Ireland, France have all put this legislation into practice and where it's been put into practice, it's very popular."
- "The reality of prostitution is not how it's presented in the media...there's this impression that prostitution is glamorous and that it's an empowered choice for young women, that the women that are involved in prostitution can manage their risks... Sorry to say that is not the reality for most of the women who are exploited in prostitution."
- "It's violent, it's abusive and women are the commodities... the treatment that is meted out to these women from the sex buyers and of the men who are controlling them would constitute under any definition as torture."
- "What's missing from this debate in every country where they have tried to pass this legislation, Is the buyers. We don't hear from them. We don't see them. If you listen to the way sex buyers talk about women, that is the best advert for criminalising them that you will ever hear."

“ Don't let anybody tell you that this is complicated and difficult.  
It really isn't. It's quite simple and it's quite straightforward.” ”



## Rhoda Grant MSP

Rhoda Grant MSP has served as an MSP for the Highlands and Islands region since 2007, having previously represented the same region from 1999 to 2003. A member of the Scottish Labour and Co-operative Party, she is currently the Scottish Labour Spokesperson for Rural Affairs, Land Reform, and Islands.

Rhoda Grant addressed the conference remotely, reflecting on her earlier efforts to enact legislation around prostitution: “I was in the position that Ash has now found herself in, in that I tried to bring forward legislation on commercial sexual exploitation before... That’s when I first met Ash and she very kindly helped me with that legislation and supported me through that.” She described her journey to understanding

- “I would have to say that I was part of the group that didn't understand it for a long period of time, and it was Trish Godman... [who] said you must try and do this, you must try and get this through because of the suffering that this causes. And so, I got involved and began to realise the real suffering that commercial sexual exploitation causes.”

She reflected on learning about the realities of commercial sexual exploitation and the suffering it causes. Rhoda stressed the need for laws that make women truly equal. She noted the declines in trafficking and exploitation in countries that have enacted similar Nordic model laws, and the increased gender equality that follows. Rhoda described the challenges of confronting organized crime and the societal excuses for inaction, such as fears of “driving it underground.” She called for courage, solidarity, and persistent campaigning.

- “We have to make sure that we put through legislation in Scotland that makes women truly equal to men, that they can't be bought and sold as commodities in Scotland.”
- People are not going to allow this legislation to go through easily and we've all heard but you know, if you ban this, if you prosecute buyers, what's going to happen is you're going to drive it underground. The trouble is it can't survive underground, that is not a good excuse to do nothing because people need to be able to see it and to buy it and that's where the demand comes from. We must tackle demand at the root.”

“ We need to have courage in our beliefs, and we need to campaign to make sure that throughout Scotland and indeed the rest of the world, women are not for sale. Women are equal and they're not commodities. ”

## Linda Thompson



Linda is originally from Northern Ireland, where she was involved in youth and community work. She led transnational work and managed an award winning multidisciplinary sexual health team. In Scotland, Linda led national HIV programmes, developing new approaches to research and education.

Currently, co-ordinates a programme of national work on commercial sexual exploitation including training, capacity building, awareness raising, and developing new resources at the [Women Support Project](#). She supports a national network of services supporting those in the sex industry and is on national working groups on sexual exploitation and human trafficking. Linda's passion is highlighting lived experiences and the impact of police on women's lives.

Linda Thompson shared frontline perspectives, highlighting estimates of 8 - 10,000 women involved in prostitution in Scotland and the lack of adequate support services. She recounted stories of women pushed into prostitution by poverty, precarious work, and the need to support their families, illustrating how vulnerability is exploited at every level from individuals to organised crime. Linda critiqued the failure of the Scottish Government to invest in exit services and the continued stigmatisation of women. She presented evidence from research and direct service work, arguing that the vast majority of women in prostitution are there due to lack of alternatives, not free choice. Linda advocated for **decriminalisation** of women, **robust support services**, and **removal of stigma and criminal records**, concluding with a call for **united activism and legislative change**.

- “As Ash was talking...I just took the liberty...to see how many women are being advertised for sale in Scotland today, on Gumtree it is 46 women and on Viva Street there is currently under 153.”

Linda shared stories from frontline experience: “Alice is 28 and she has two fabulous kids... She is financially struggling. She is struggling to pay her rent. She has built up debt... She feels that she's been faced with an impossible choice.” Alice is then exploited at each stage by men offering ‘sex for rent,’ exploitative loans, and ultimately by the sex industry itself. “Is that exploitation? Yes, absolutely.”

- “The exploitation becomes about vulnerability in the sex industry and the system of prostitution relying on women who are pushed to the margins. Why is it that women who are already on the margins are the ones who become involved in this industry? Because it is the vulnerabilities that women have.”
- “Women say they feel isolated, and that they carry a heavyweight of shame and stigma... they experience high, high, high levels of violence from physical assaults, robbery, beaten, sexual violence, rape and sexual assault. Men didn't buy my consent. They bought my silence.”
- “[Our manifesto](#)... women wanted the end of being criminalised in Scotland. Women also wanted dedicated services. We need comprehensive support, harm reduction support, consistent support across Scotland, and exiting support. This is what women have asked for.”

“ Men should not have the right to use their power, and their resources to gain access sexual access to women's bodies who do not want it. Surely the time is right now to support women like Katie be able to have the options that they may want in their lives. ”



## Kat Banyard

Katherine is the founder of [UK Feminista](#), a national charitable organisation that supports individuals and organisations to take action for equality between women and men. She is the author of two books on women's equality: *The Equality Illusion: The Truth About Women and Men Today* (2010) and *Pimp State: Sex, Money and the Future of Equality* (2016). Katherine has a Masters in Politics (Distinction) from the University of Sheffield.

Kat Banyard delivered a video statement strongly endorsing the Unbuyable Bill. She outlined why the Nordic/end demand model is effective:

- Criminalising buyers reduces demand and trafficking.
- Decriminalising sellers delivers justice to victims.
- Quashing historic convictions helps women exit.
- Mandating state support is vital for recovery.
- **"The focus of today is obviously Ash Regan's new bill, The Unbuyable Bill. Fundamentally, this is a bill that would be transformative, shifting the burden of criminality off victims of sexual exploitation and placing it where it belongs on the perpetrators."**

Kat cited international research and the success of Sweden, France, and others, noting that claims about "driving prostitution underground" are not supported by evidence. She emphasised that prostitution is violence against women and that Scotland's law must reflect that, concluding with a call for widespread support and action.

- **"Sweden was the first country to criminalise paying for sex and shift the burden of criminality off the victims back in 1999, which gives us over two decades of evidence of its effectiveness. What the research in Sweden has shown is that demand has dropped substantially."**
- **"A report by the European Commission concluded, and I quote: 'sex markets are reliant by definition on buyers finding spaces and places where it's possible to pay for sex. In this sense, the underground argument has a logical fallacy at its heart since some level of visibility is required.'"**
- **"As a form of violence against women, it's fundamentally unjust that victims can currently be criminally sanctioned for their own exploitation, it's also completely counterproductive. Sanctions can make it harder for women to exit the sex trade and rebuild their lives."**

**“ We ([UK FEMINISTA](#)) fully support the Unbuyable Bill.  
We urge MSPs to back it and we ask everybody to take action to try  
and encourage your MSP to back it.  
It's a change that must come to Scotland.” ”**

# Diane Martin CBE

Survivor of prostitution and trafficking in her late teens, she has over 30 years' experience of supporting women exiting prostitution. 15 years as Founder and Director of a specialist service in London; developing a range of services from street outreach to aftercare.

She has worked extensively with Government, local authority partnerships, the criminal justice system and NGOs, to develop and improve strategy, frontline services, and prevention and exiting options with a violence against women and girl's framework and End Demand approach.

Diane is currently Chair of the '[A Model for Scotland](#)' (Modail airson Alba) campaign and a member of Scotland's Cross Party Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation.



Diane shared deeply personal testimony about her exploitation: “I’m a survivor of what was ridiculously termed high class prostitution in London I’ve been trafficked overseas and years later founded this charity in London, which was called Trust, specifically supporting women exploited through street-based prostitution.”

- “We get fed the lie that of course trafficking is bad. The prostitution or sex work as it has been sanitised and reframed as a job like any other. My body and my mind experienced no difference between prostitution and trafficking.”
- “The sense of entitlement they believed that paying afforded them crosses every section of society. But you can't buy consent. The better wallpaper and a minibar do not dilute what it feels like when someone has a gun and asked if you want to see your mum again.”
- “Prostitution is a violent and dehumanising system that overwhelmingly exploits the most vulnerable in our society. Prostitution is not about empowerment or labour laws; it's about trapping women and children in a violent and predatory structure that is an abuse of their human rights.”
- “Women should not be punished for their own exploitation and burdened by criminality... We also need to ensure that historical prostitution related charges are expunged from their records as this causes very real barriers to exiting and gaining employment, as well as ongoing psychological distress and we need robust and resourced exit pathways for them.”

Diane stressed that survivors' stories reveal prostitution and trafficking as the same system of exploitation. She called for everyone to support the Bill and powerfully challenged myths about “safe” prostitution and the idea of “good punters,” insisting that only by focusing on demand and providing real support can true change occur.

**We need your outrage, and we need your action!**

“

It is possible to have an impact if we work together... it is imperative that no one is left behind and our duty as a society is to see the reality and not turn away.”

”

# Esther - Lived Experience

Survivor of Prostitution and Policy Advisor for the [Nordic Model Now Organisation](#). Founded in March 2016, Nordic Model Now! is a secular, feminist, grassroots women's group based in the UK that is campaigning for the abolition of prostitution and related practices (such as lap-dancing, pornography and surrogacy). While abortion is not the focus of our campaign, as feminists we recognise women's human right to safe, legal abortion services.



Esther described entering prostitution after escaping domestic abuse, detailing how financial need and grooming led her into the sex trade. "I'm the policy adviser at [Nordic Model Now](#) and a survivor of pornography and prostitution. I've also experienced domestic abuse and coercive control. The dynamics are very similar, particularly gradual isolation from others and the multi-faceted challenges you experience or fear, often with good reason you will experience if you try to leave without support."

- **"I became involved in the sex industry after an acrimonious and costly divorce... I was groomed into being shared with multiple other men by a man I met and trusted... I met my first sex buyer. That's how easy it was to be sucked in."**

She exposed the coercive and violent nature of the industry, including extreme acts of violence and buyers' indifference to women's suffering. Esther argued that the rhetoric of "choice" is a form of self-protection for women in prostitution, and that meaningful recovery requires consistent support, housing, and a shift in public attitudes and policy.

- **"I was beaten, suffocated, spat on, urinated on, defecated on and injured by buyers many times... If my body was marked by a buyer, I would take days off until the marks were less visible because otherwise the next buyer will see them as a challenge to repeat that level of violence."**
- **"If you consulted me about my lived experience while I was in the sex industry I would have said I chose it and felt empowered. This what you tell yourself because the reality is unbearable. You blame yourself and can see no way out. It's a form of self-protection."**

Esther also exposed the economic realities: "In 2016, the gross income received by the Treasury from prostitution was 5.33 billion. In 2023 it was 6.27 billion, reflecting increased numbers of women becoming involved, not increases in what they can charge. By comparison, the annual turnover of the UK fishing fleet was 1.08 billion in 2023, and the UK steel industry contributes 2.4 billion to the UK GDP. The Office of National Statistics estimated in 2016 that the net agonal income. What women in prostitution receive as net is 24% of their gross income the Treasury receives costs take 76%."

**“ You cannot consent to acts of torture and inhuman or degrading treatment, and it doesn't become work through payment... I just want to say never again. ”**

# Discussion

**Q: How can unions better support this legislation and women's rights?**

**A:** Panellists agreed that union engagement is crucial but currently lacking. Agnes Tolmie and Ash Regan urged union members to push for action and accountability within their organizations.

**On union support:**

- “It would be very helpful if the unions across Scotland would come out in support of this... If there is anyone in this room who supports this legislation, as a member of a union we really need to get together, I need your support and help to try to push that forward as much as possible.”

**Q: What about women who sell sex together, will this law criminalise them as a brothel?**

**A:** Ash Regan clarified that the proposed law would not change Scotland's existing brothel-keeping laws but would decriminalize women selling sex. Linda Thompson noted the need for clearer, more supportive guidance to prevent criminalization of women working together for safety.

**On brothel laws and women working together:**

- “This law doesn't change anything with regards to brothel keeping. Brothel keeping is already illegal... The Law I'm proposing would decriminalise women who are working in prostitution and expunge their previous convictions and it just seeks to criminalise the buyers.”
- “Absolutely for the Women's Support project we would not support women who were selling sex together in a premises at one time being criminalised. We have never supported that current legislation and we would be calling for it to be reviewed and removed along with other legislation.”

**Q: How can we support women with no recourse to public funds or in precarious immigration situations?**

**A:** Panellists highlighted the severe vulnerability of migrant and undocumented women, the barriers created by hostile immigration policy, and the need for properly funded services and safe accommodation. The bill would send a positive message, but UK-wide action is necessary.

**On support for women with no recourse to public funds:**

- “The current hostile rhetoric around immigration makes a further barrier for very vulnerable women to come forward. Scottish Government's inaction on prostitution... creates an environment where women pick up on the messages that we provide to society. That they wouldn't be believed, that they wouldn't be respected.”

# Discussion

**Q: Does criminalising buyers drive prostitution underground?**

**A:** Multiple speakers, drawing on research from Sweden and France, argued that the “underground” argument is a myth. Prostitution requires visibility for buyers and sellers to connect, and support services can still reach women.

**On the underground myth:**

- “A report by the European Commission concluded, and I quote: ‘sex markets are reliant by definition on buyers finding spaces and places where it's possible to pay for sex. In this sense, the underground argument has a logical fallacy at its heart since some level of visibility is required.’”

**Q: What is the role of men and how can we make buyers more visible in this debate?**

**A:** Ash Regan and Diane Martin stressed the need to bring buyers’ attitudes and actions into public discourse, challenging entitlement and misogyny. They called for legislative, cultural, and educational change to shift focus from women to those who exploit them.

- “I’m going to try to do more of as this bill progresses. I think it’s a very important part of this picture... If you listen to the way sex buyers talk about women, that is the best advert for criminalising them that you will ever, hear.”

**Q: What actions can individuals take to support the bill?**

**A:** The panel encouraged attendees to contact MSPs, join advocacy networks, raise awareness in their communities, and support survivors’ voices and advise that it ties in with their Equally Safe Strategy the Scottish Government’s national framework for preventing and eradicating violence against women and girls.

**On what supporters can do:**

- “Go and e-mail all your politicians and tell them that you feel passionately about this piece of legislation and ask them. What are their views? What are they thinking, what is their political party thinking? I think that’s all that’s very useful and ask to meet with them and just supporting this Bill online and supporting it where you can. Talk about it where you are with women that you know, to talk about this issue with them. I think all that sort of thing helps.”

# **Thank You!**

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The Scottish Women's Convention thanks all women who attended our conference and who contributed online and via email. We thank our speakers for providing their contributions on the day.

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