

# THE COST OF VULNERABILITY:

Why Prostitution isn't Work



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## Agnes Tolmie, SWC Chair

Further to our conference in September 2025 on Understanding the Prostitution Bill, our session was left with unanswered questions. We felt it was therefore vital to hold an additional session to widen participation, allowing for more women to be involved and to help clarify and answer more of the significant points that had been raised. At the heart of many of these questions was the claim that prostitution should be recognised as “real work” and thus protected by employment law. Here at the Scottish Women’s Convention, we firmly challenge this position. Decades of feminist organising and trade union campaigns have fought for decent work: work that is safe, fairly paid, freely chosen, and protected by workplace rights.

- “Decent work means dignity, safety and real choice...prostitution fails to meet these standards in any shape or form.”

Women engaged in prostitution are not a random group. They are overwhelmingly women living in poverty, women with a history of abuse and women facing homelessness, addiction, and a distinct lack of any real alternatives. Any attempt to present prostitution as worthwhile and fulfilling employment ignores these structural realities. We must ask ourselves this: how can terms and conditions be negotiated where the balance of power is so profoundly unequal; how can fair pay be negotiated when consent is driven by economic desperation; how can employment rights apply to an arrangement in which sexual access to women’s bodies is bought and sold?

“Sexual harassment and sexual assault do not become acceptable just because money changes hands, to claim otherwise is not progressive, it is a retrograde step in women’s rights.”

In line with our previous work on violence against women and girls, including misogyny, trafficking and domestic abuse, the Scottish Women’s Convention stands firmly behind Ash Regan’s The Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill and its drive towards the adoption of the Nordic Model. This approach decriminalises women in prostitution, holds men buying sex accountable for their actions and demands properly resourced exit routes and support for women.

The SWC believes that all MSPs must get behind this Bill, it’s the very least they can do. For Scotland to credibly claim it has zero tolerance for violence against women and girls, this commitment must extend to all of them, and prostitution is no exception.

### Key Points & Recommendations

1. Reject the classification of prostitution as “work”, recognising its incompatibility with employment rights, dignity, and women’s equality.
2. Commit to the Nordic Model as the first step in decriminalising women and demanding accountability for buyers and profiteers.
3. Ensure that all policy and legislative discussions on prostitution address coercion, inequality, and economic need.
4. Fund meaningful exit routes and support services, including in housing, healthcare, education, employment, and income security.
5. Prioritise the voices of women with lived experience in policymaking.
6. Reassert feminist and trade union principles, rejecting the commodification of women’s bodies as an individual choice.

**Heli St Luce - Heli designs and facilitates interactive workshops for adults and businesses, she is a coach, aromatherapist and ceremony/ritual guide. As the child of an underage, immigrant, single mother she was witness to exploitation first 'saving' her mother and then making her sick. 'I've always wanted to change the world, working with Nordic Model Now creates a real and valuable way to do that.'**

Heli began by stating that any effective response to prostitution must first begin with an accurate understanding of the realities involved. She challenged the common assumption that prostitution is consensual sex between equals stating that this interpretation was completely false.

Drawing on survivor testimony to support this, Heli emphasised that prostitution is instead a system of power, coercion, control, and abuse.

Emily, a college student, entered prostitution believing it was “easy money” and legitimate work. She stated:

“I was sold a complete line. It's not easy money. To the buyer, you are nothing more than an object for their consumption, not an actual human being with emotions.”

Emily described how the exchange of money creates entitlement:

- “You're expected to put up with whatever they want to do and say with no regard for your feelings.”

Another survivor, Esther, reinforced this point:

- “The punter is king. It's a total myth that you can negotiate with him as an equal.”

Esther stated that any negotiation was undermined by threats of violence, bad online reviews, reprisals from brothel managers, and control from pimps. Heli argued that this dynamic alone should fundamentally distinguish prostitution from consensual sexual relationships. Heli remarked that health and safety risks in prostitution are severe and unavoidable. These include sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancy, physical injuries, brain injury from strangulation, high rates of PTSD and other mental health disorders. Heli stressed that the use of condoms does not mitigate risk from many of these injuries and are frequently refused by buyers.

Heli argued:

- “In any other industry with such risks, workers would be required to wear full protective equipment but in prostitution, this is impossible.”

Heli further examined the impact of men buying sex, arguing that it has broader social consequences as men do not pay for sex to instigate mutual desire but instead.

“...pay the women because she does not want to have sex with him and because they also don't have to consider her feelings or needs.”

Heli stressed that this practice reinforces male entitlement, reduces empathy, and normalises their control over women. Citing multiple studies, she stated that men who buy sex are more likely to commit sexual violence, suggesting that higher levels of prostitution correlate with higher levels of male violence against women and girls in society in general.

Heli went on to discuss the Nordic Model, a policy framework that recognises prostitution as both a cause and consequence of gender inequality. Introduced in Sweden in 1999, it was described as having five key components: decriminalising those who sell sex, providing funded exit services for women involved in prostitution, criminalising the purchase of sex to change male behaviour, strengthening laws against pimping and trafficking, and implementing broader measures such as police training and anti-poverty initiatives. Heli argued in the countries where this model had been well implemented, there had been a reduction in the size of the sex trade and helped curtail international trafficking.

In direct contrast, Heli criticised the full decriminalisation model, using New Zealand, Germany, and the Netherlands as examples. She stated that evidence from these countries shows: rapid industry growth; continued widespread violence against women and girls involved in prostitution; minimal enforcement of statutory regulations and the standardisation of prostitution as ordinary work. In New Zealand, there were 11 brothel inspections in 12 years despite over 1,000 licences being granted during this time and in Germany, around one million men pay for sex every single day.

Heli went on to say that comparative evidence clearly showed that the Nordic model was a safer option than full decriminalisation with less women dying as a result. However, Heli stated, that the ultimate goal was not just to make prostitution safe but was instead to stamp it out altogether.

Heli concluded by paraphrasing the American academic, Valerie Hudson, who argued that the homicide rate for women involved in prostitution is 229 per 100,000, higher than any other occupation, including soldiers in combat: there is no other form of work that has a homicide rate that high.

Heli emphasised that this clearly shows us that:

**“Prostitution is not work, but socially sanctioned violence.”**

**Anne Dean** - Anne recently retired from her 43-year nursing career having worked as a District Nurse, within Greater Glasgow, latterly in specialising in Rehabilitation: long term care, assisting in early discharge from hospital and improving people's everyday quality of life. Throughout this time, Anne has been, and still is, an active trade unionist, representing GMB members and campaigning for the people she worked alongside and, in the communities, she cared for. Since retirement, Anne has continued to campaign on women's rights including volunteering with Abortion Rights Scotland, Labour Women's Declaration and Women's Rights Network.

Anne trained and worked as a district nurse in the 1990s in Glasgow's East End, an area deeply affected by deprivation, addiction, and inequality, and which sadly still is today. Anne stated that at that time, alcohol and drug dependency levels were among the highest in Europe, and preventing the spread of HIV and hepatitis B was a major NHS Scotland priority. Due to this, much of Anne's work involved visiting hostels for the homeless.

Historically, these hostels had been single sex, staffed, and relatively stable environments during the day. However, a change in local authority policy, whereby buildings were being sold to generate revenue, led to the introduction of mixed-sex accommodation which mainly sat in large, prefabricated units on isolated brownfield sites, far from essential services and public transport. Anne said that it soon became clear that many young women living there were drug or alcohol dependent and had turned to prostitution as a means to survive encouraged, exploited, and controlled by the male residents who profited both financially and sexually from them.

Anne stated that these women often came from unsettled backgrounds; care leavers, young mothers who had lost custody of their children, women excluded from education or employment, and those who had been forced out of their family homes. At that time, support for care leavers was minimal. Apart from methadone clinics and outreach services focusing largely on disease prevention, there was very little meaningful protection or long-term help, and these women were left vulnerable and alone.

Anne stated that initially, and naively, she had believed that these women were exercising personal choice and control over their own bodies and as a nurse she strived to carry out her work and be non-judgmental. Anne remarked that it soon became abundantly clear that these women had no real choice over their situation. These women lived in chaotic, violent environments, with constant noise, fear, and intimidation. Many of them suffered serious injuries including fractures, head injuries, pelvic trauma, concussions, and sexual diseases: all clear evidence of sustained violence. These women were effectively prisoners.

Anne remarked that it was in this environment that she first met Emma Caldwell before her murder in 2005. "Emma stood out...young, pretty and particularly vulnerable."

Emma had come from a good home but had been drawn into damaging relationships and addiction. Like the other women, she was fighting daily just to survive. Many of the women who stayed at the hostels, and who knew Emma, had reported the man who later murdered Emma, yet no effective action had been taken against him.

Anne remarked that the failure of the authorities to act on the statements of these women lies at the very heart of this tragedy and she was hopeful that the forthcoming inquiry and proposed legislation would lead to the accounts of women, who reported dangerous men, being taken more seriously.

Anne also cared for older women who had exited prostitution due to illness, disability, or increased age forcing them out. These women were physically and mentally traumatised, deeply ashamed, and often in abject poverty. The criminal records they had received for being involved in prostitution meant that the likelihood of them ever securing employment or an adequate pension was minimal. These women's lives had been marked by long term abuse and exclusion.

Anne argued that historically, prostitution has been criminalised under the guise of public health, with women blamed and stigmatised while men never being held accountable. That stigma, rooted in Victorian attitudes, still persists today.

“Women remain the most vulnerable party in this unequal relationship yet continue to bear the brunt of the blame and shame.”

Anne concluded by saying that prostitution has changed in over time, but never in substance. Whether prostitution takes place on the street or indoors, the harm and exploitation remain, particularly for the most marginalised women.

“It is time to stop treating women as the problem and start addressing the men and systems that exploit them.”



**Kate Ramsden** - Kate has been an active trade unionist and left feminist most of her working life. She was a lay member on the national leadership body of her trade union until her retirement in 2023 and continues to participate as a retired member. In her various current roles, including joint secretary of Aberdeen Trades Union Council, Kate remains actively involved in campaigning for the rights of women, children, migrants and other marginalised groups, both in Scotland and internationally. A social worker for over 40 years, Kate has actively promoted the profession and still campaigns for social work practitioners to have a working environment that empowers relationship-based practice and a human rights focus. Kate reads, supports, and writes for the Morning Star and was instrumental in setting up the Morning Star Women's Readers and Supporters Group.

Kate delivered a clear and uncompromising contribution on prostitution, stressing that it is basically another form of violence against women and girls and placing it firmly within the systems of patriarchy, inequality, male dominance, and male entitlement. Kate argued that prostitution can never be viewed as something which is neutral or empowering for women but rather as an abusive practice deeply rooted in the buying and selling of women's bodies.

·“The buying of women's bodies by men for sexual pleasure is oppressive and abusive.”

Kate strongly welcomed Ash Regan's proposed Bill, applauding its central principle of decriminalising women involved in prostitution while criminalising those who continuously exploit them, including buyers and pimps. Kate said that the Bill was a crucial shift away from punishing the women involved in prostitution while also providing meaningful routes out of prostitution for them.

·“This Bill recognises women in prostitution as victims of inequality and exploitation, not criminals.”

Kate also addressed the role of legislation in helping to shape social norms. She argued that by criminalising buyers this would send a powerful message about what society deems acceptable behaviour, drawing parallels with previous public health legislation, such as the public smoking ban, which helped change behaviour over time. Kate stated that such measures would not only improve overall safety for women in prostitution but reinforce the broader principle that women's bodies are not commodities.

·“Buying and profiting from women's bodies is socially unacceptable.”

The need for intervention was framed within the wider context of rising violence against women and girls. Kate pointed to increasing sexual harassment in the workplace, communities, and schools, as well as the growing acceptance of sexual violence, illustrated by the need for governments to legislate against extreme practices, such as choking, in pornography. Prostitution, Kate argued, both reflects and reinforces this culture.

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·“Prostitution is one of the most egregious forms of violence against women in our patriarchal society.”

·“Prostitution actively trains men to see women as less than human.”

Kate directly challenged claims that criminalising buyers would drive prostitution underground and would in fact increase harm. Kate noted that wider evidence, both nationally and internationally, did not support this argument, highlighting that countries which have either legalised or fully decriminalised prostitution actually experience higher levels of violence and homicide against women in prostitution than countries operating the Nordic model.

“Supporting the Nordic model is about challenging male entitlement and standing unequivocally for women’s rights.”

Kate drew attention to the impact of legalisation on demand, citing commercial brothel systems and the normalisation of mass sex buying as examples. Kate argued that this shapes male behaviour beyond prostitution itself, contributing to wider societal harms and reduced safety for women overall.

“These harms are not incidental — they are intrinsic to the system.” Serious concern was raised about treating prostitution as legitimate work. Kate warned that this approach removes incentives to support exit strategies and risks institutionalising prostitution as an acceptable career path.

Drawing from lived experience statements, Kate described how payment alters the power dynamic, with men believing they have unrestricted access to women’s bodies. The private and unregulated nature of prostitution leaves women feeling extremely vulnerable, with some survivor testimonies describing experiences comparable with internationally prohibited forms of torture.

Kate also addressed the many pitfalls for women in the decriminalisation model, referencing legal cases where women were sued by men for their not being satisfied and failing to orgasm and online reviews which reduced women to objects to be rated and consumed. This, Kate argued, actively promotes dehumanisation.

Claims that decriminalisation reduces trafficking were firmly rejected. Kate touched on research, namely from the London School of Economics, which showed higher levels of sex trafficking in countries where buying sex was legal, noting that trafficking overwhelmingly targets the most vulnerable women.

Finally, Kate expressed deep concern over the promotion of a “sex work is work” narrative by many trade unions, arguing that meaningful health and safety protections are impossible when women’s bodies are the workplace. Instead, she called on women in the trade union movement to rally against male dominance in the unions and to fight against the oppression of women.

“We must ask who benefits from prostitution, and whose interests are really being served.”

Finally, Kate challenged the myths surrounding prostitution as a meaningful choice for women and stressed how supporting the Nordic model is essential to challenging violence against women and girls and is intrinsically a moral and political responsibility.

“Supporting the Nordic model is about challenging male entitlement and standing firmly for women’s rights.”

## Discussion

After hearing from the guest speakers, we held a question-and-answer session which allowed the women in attendance the opportunity to seek clarification on some of the points raised. The women contributing to the session included MSPs, third sector employees, campaigners, trade unionists, and survivors as well as members of the general public.

The following section draws together the key themes from these discussions and highlights the urgent need for legislative reform and cultural change around prostitution. Much of the discussion was based around the survivor testimony of X who joined the session for the discussions and who was happy to answer questions on her lived experience in order to help support the Bill.

Ash Regan MSP, the Bill's sponsor, was in attendance and outlined the precarious parliamentary position of the Bill, which as yet has no guaranteed majority despite having cross party support: which makes it more viable than previous attempts. Ash stressed that without sufficient support at Stage One, the legislation would become 'another failed attempt' at helping the women involved in prostitution and stated that in order to prevent this, she and her team were involved in negotiations with MSPs to help garner support.

Polling evidence clearly shows overwhelming support for the Bill, particularly rejecting the idea that prostitution should be treated as ordinary employment or be included in back-to-work schemes.

As a result of this discussion, the women acknowledged, and stressed, the importance of public pressure, direct engagement with MSPs, and consistent media and social media promotion in order to make the Bill more visible.

- "Women are angry that we are still fighting against this in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century."

### Making Their Voices Heard: Using Women's Lived Experience as Evidence

Across the discussion, the women all agreed that the voices of those with lived experience, particularly those who had exited prostitution, should be recognised as the most powerful measure of engagement and that politicians were more likely to act and support the Bill when public pressure was both visible and sustained.

- "It's only when women leave that they can recognise the harm that it did."
- "The most powerful arguments always come from women's stories."

The discussion looked at how women currently involved in prostitution often feel compelled to defend the system, either as a coping mechanism or due to economic necessity.

- "Women who are currently involved in prostitution have to defend the system...it's a survival strategy."

### Questioning the Narrative of Choice and Work

X's contribution was a pivotal moment in the discussion and provided a stark contrast to continued claims that prostitution is a meaningful choice or decent employment. X directly challenged the idea that prostitution could ever be considered a job.

- "It is the only place of work that you can expect to be raped...if that happened in any other workplace, you'd go straight to HR or the police."

She described being coerced into prostitution at the age of 17, still a child in the eyes of the law. She spoke on how she coped psychologically by framing what was happening to her as just infidelity rather than exploitation.

- “I told myself I had just cheated on my boyfriend. It took me years to realise that what happened to me wasn’t my fault.”

X also challenged the myth surrounding freedom of choice in prostitution. She explained that in her experience, refusing sex or withdrawing consent mid-act was never an option. Payment created a sense of entitlement in sex buyers, with men not seeing her as a human being but as a body they had bought for their own pleasure.

- “There is no refusing, and there is no stopping halfway through...they have paid for the use of your body, and they let you know it.”
- “Once money has changed hands, there is no going back.”

The women we spoke to then discussed the harm related to the ‘sex work is work’ narrative, drawing particular concern to trade union and academic endorsement of prostitution. Considering that the views of these establishments carry such weight in policymaking and in driving social change, this continued practice of legitimising prostitution proved deeply unsettling.

One woman raised concerns over why higher education institutions were often reproducing industry talking points, such as criminalising sex buyers leads to prostitution being “driven underground.” and questioned what she was being taught in her criminology lectures and being encouraged to read in core texts:

- “I was sitting in the classes thinking ‘what are they teaching students and why?’”
- “Universities are private industries, I do wonder if money is filtering through from pornography, dressed up as trusts.”

The women we spoke to then discussed this further and agreed that the global evidence from Nordic Model countries showed improved safety, reduced demand, and a generational cultural change, citing Sweden as an example where buying sex is seen as socially unacceptable as drink-driving.

- “Two decades have grown up seeing sex buying as unacceptable and that women are not products.”

Some of the women we spoke to then voiced their disappointment and frustration over trade union’s views on sex work particularly since historically they were committed to equality and securing women’s rights in the workplace. They argued that this was a profound moral contradiction and was undermining decades of feminist campaigning and trade union activism against sexual exploitation and harassment.

- “How can you represent women in the workplace when the workplace is their own body.”
- “Some of the unions supporting sex work are male dominated.”
- “No other job requires you to surrender your bodily autonomy as part of the job description.”
- “I’m almost taking it personally as a trade unionist to see unions now backing something that undermines everything we fought for.”

### Who Are These Men?

X's contribution also addressed the demographics of sex buyers. Contrary to popular belief, she said that these men came from all ages, backgrounds, and ethnicities, but did confirm that the overwhelming majority of them were married men with wives and children. This quashes the notion of the 'just bad men' mentality that society has been led to believe and instead reveals a much broader cultural tolerance that is allowing this abuse of women and girls to continue. This incited a discussion amongst the women we spoke to over the continued anonymity of the men who pay women for sex. While women are repeatedly asked to speak out publicly on this, men remain largely invisible and they argued that the economic and social costs of sex buying should be exposed.

- "How much money is being taken out of families in Scotland by men funding their own habits...that money should be going into family homes."

The persistence of the 'less safe' argument was linked to powerful lobbying by the global sex industry, and it was noted that justifications such as 'this is the oldest profession in the world' were being used to authenticate the argument and normalise the exploitation of women and girls. After discussion it was agreed:

- "Prostitution is not the oldest profession in the world; it is the oldest exploitation."

### Popular Culture and the Romanticism of Personal Choice

The women we spoke to discussed how prostitution is now being touted as glamorous and empowering, which is in stark contrast to the reality of survivors lived experience where coercion, entitlement and male domination were standard practice. Films such as *Pretty Woman*, where a young woman is 'rescued' by a billionaire, were seen as a cultural turning point, swaying public attitudes, and making young women believe that prostitution could be made to work for you - if you worked hard enough.

- "It's basically Cinderella for adults and it's still being shown over and over again on television...it has painted a completely false picture of what prostitution delivers for women."

Similarly, the women we spoke to indicated that pornography, and platforms such as OnlyFans, were key drivers of cultural acceptance, promoting female empowerment, choice, and entrepreneurial skills.

- "Pornography has become sex education and that's terrifying."
- "For young women especially, selling sex and your body are seen as normal."
- "It makes me really sad how young women and men see Each other now...we see how boys speak to girls at school and even about their teachers."

### Decriminalisation and What it Means for Women

A core pillar of the Bill is the decriminalisation of women involved in prostitution and the expunging of their criminal records. The women we spoke to stressed that prosecuting women involved in prostitution has trapped them in cycles of poverty, stigma and social exclusion which is inherently wrong.

- "Removing criminal records for these women would be similar to the historic convictions under homophobic laws, society and the law recognising that they had got it wrong."

## Conclusion

At our session, and from the women we spoke to at our Understanding the Prostitution Bill conference, it was clear that the Stage One vote presents a clear opportunity for MSPs to do the right thing for women in Scotland. Survivor testimony leaves no ambiguity: prostitution is not work, consent is not freely given, and abuse is extreme rather than exceptional.

Supporting this Bill allows Scotland to align its views with its commitment to end violence for women and girls, placing the responsibility at the feet of those men who drive the demand while offering support and restoring dignity to those women who have been so wrongfully exploited.

Here at the Scottish Women's Convention, we firmly believe that as women, as trade unionists and as a society committed to equality, we must challenge systems that accept the buying and selling of women's bodies in Scotland.

“Equality means nothing if it does not include the most exploited women.”

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# Thank You!

The Scottish Women's Convention thanks all women who contributed to this important discussion.

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