

Stop sexual exploitation by ending impunity for pimps and punters. Provide support, not sanctions, for victims.

Summary

Commercial sexual exploitation is rife in Britain. To end the sex trafficking and prostitution trade, the Government must tackle the demand that drives it - just as countries including France, Ireland, Sweden and Norway have done.

This requires criminalising paying for sex and enabling the prostitution of others, while decriminalising victims of sexual exploitation and providing support and exiting services. There is extensive evidence that this 'end demand' approach deters men from paying for sex, changes public attitudes, and makes countries more hostile destinations for sex traffickers.

What's the problem?

England and Wales are low-risk, high-value destinations for sex traffickers

England and Wales are highly attractive destinations for sex traffickers due to the ongoing lack of Government action to tackle demand from sex buyers and hold pimping websites that facilitate trafficking accountable.¹

Prostitution laws are outdated and unjust: victims are punished, while perpetrators enjoy impunity

Prostitution is a form of violence against women.² Yet men who exploit vulnerable women by paying for sex enjoy impunity under current laws, and individuals who are sexually exploited can face criminal sanctions for soliciting.³

Pimping websites operate freely

Highly lucrative pimping websites – which profit from hosting adverts for prostitution – operate openly and legally. These 'online brothels' incentivise and facilitate sex trafficking.⁴ They centralise and concentrate demand from sex buyers online, making it as easy to order a woman to sexually exploit as it is to order a take-away.

"This is a classic case of 'the pretty ones don't have to work hard'...She's Polish and her English is not good...I was reminded of the Smiths song 'Girlfriend in a Coma'...All the while she seemed completely disinterested and mechanical...I finally decided to fuck her, in mish...All the while, she kept her face turned to one side."

-Online 'review' posted by a sex buyer. Amount paid £100.

What's the solution?

End impunity for pimps and punters - and provide support, not sanctions, for victims.

England and Wales need a progressive legal framework that shifts the burden of criminality off victims and on to those who perpetrate and profit from sexual exploitation; a framework that is designed to end commercial sexual exploitation. To achieve this, the Government must:

- 1. Hold exploiters accountable by making it a criminal offence to enable or profit from the prostitution of another person, offline and online.**
- 2. Deter demand by making it a criminal offence to pay for sex.**
- 3. Stop punishing victims by repealing the offence of soliciting in a public place.**
- 4. Support victims to exit and recover by providing specialist services.**

An evidence-based approach?

There is extensive research evidencing the real-world effectiveness of shifting the burden of criminality off victims and onto perpetrators - including pimps and sex buyers - in order to prevent sexual exploitation. This 'demand reduction' approach to prostitution and sex trafficking has so far been adopted by France, Ireland, Northern Ireland, Norway, Israel, Iceland and Canada.

- Sweden was the first country to criminalise paying for sex and decriminalise victims of sexual exploitation in 1999, affording over two decades of evidence. It demonstrates that demand has dropped, public attitudes have transformed, and traffickers are being deterred.⁵**
- In Ireland, the demand-reduction approach has "increased the likelihood that women in prostitution will report violence committed against them without fear of being criminalised themselves."⁶**
- In France, hundreds of women have been supported by exiting programmes, with one major service reporting, "90% of those who have finished an exit programme...have found a stable job at the end."⁷ Meanwhile, 78% of the French public support the country's new approach to prostitution.⁸**

In 2023, the Home Affairs Select Committee recommended outlawing pimping websites:

"Legislation which bans third party profit-taking from the prostitution of another person should be extended to prohibit any individual or company from enabling and/or profiting from the prostitution of another person, including facilitation that takes place via online, digital services, websites and the internet."⁹

“Prostitution is what most people imagine it to be: violent and dangerous. In the six years that I was involved, I endured a gang rape and three separate rapes...The only countries in Europe who are making a substantial impact in the fight against modern day slavery are the ones who have acknowledged and faced the cause: the demand.”

-Mia de Faoite, survivor and policy adviser

1 Bust the Business Model: How to stop sex trafficking and sexual exploitation in the UK, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2021. Access [online](#).

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3 Behind Closed Doors: Organised sexual exploitation in England and Wales, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade, 2018. Access [online](#).

4 Online Pimping: An Inquiry into Sexual Exploitation Advertising Websites, Cross-Party Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2021. Access [online](#).

5 Bust the Business Model: How to stop sex trafficking and sexual exploitation in the UK, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation, 2021. Access [online](#).

6 Shifting the Burden of Criminality, Sexual Exploitation Research Programme University College Dublin, 2020, p.104. Access [online](#).

7 International Insights: How Scotland can learn from international efforts to combat commercial sexual exploitation, A Model For Scotland, 2023. Access [online](#).

8 ‘Supreme Court – and public opinion – enshrines French abolitionist legislation on prostitution!’, CAP International. Access [online](#).

9 Human trafficking, First Report of Session 2023–24, House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 2023. Access [online](#).