# **Input for Special Rapporteur for Violence Against Women and Girls’ report on violence against women and prostitution**

## Introduction

This input is compiled by a team of volunteers for the feminist organisation, FiLiA. Contributors include women working in services that support women affected by prostitution; survivors of the sex trade; and academic researchers. FiLiA is a charity based in the UK with a global reach. This input therefore provides evidence of the links between prostitution and violence against women and girls (VAWG) from a UK context alongside wider global studies, to reflect that both the issues of prostitution and VAWG are global phenomena that traverse borders, legislation, and cultures. The evidence presented suggests not only that VWAG and prostitution are inextricably linked, but are mutually reinforcing and dependent. Our contribution provides evidence in response to questions 4, 7, 8, 11, 12 and 13.

## 4. What forms of violence are prostituted women and girls subjected to (physical, psychological, sexual, economic, administrative, or other)?

The scale of brutality inflicted upon women in prostitution cannot be overstated. For example, 81% of prostituted women report being subjected to client violence (Hester, 2004). This includes rape, sexual assault, choking, strangulation, and physical assault (with and without weapons). Biting and burning with cigarettes are not uncommon. Women in prostitution report lacerations, bruising, bleeding from the vagina, black eyes and open wounds resulting from their encounters with pimps and punters (Farley, 2023). Survivors of prostitution describe fearing for their life: “I remember on a Sunday night I just had a punter round my flat and he tried to kill me. I managed to get him out, and I just booked a ticket [to leave the city]” (Trevi, 2022).

Women in the sex trade disclose that this complex interrelation of physical, sexual, and psychological violence produce feelings of dehumanisation. Dissociation and minimisation of the violence are common strategies among prostituted women to deal with the expectation of violence, as one prostitution survivor explained: “When I was 23, I got gang raped by a load of men and I thought ‘fuck it’, and went to a really dark place” (Trevi, 2022).

Rates of complex PTSD exceeding those of survivors of combat or torture have been identified in prostituted women (Farley, 2023). Psychological harm is coupled with long-term physical side effects, including pelvic floor degradation; infertility caused by inflammation of the ovarian tubes; oral illnesses; skin eczema; sleep disorders; and substance abuse (Bissinger, 2020). One survivor described being in constant pain; her hip had been broken from being repeatedly thrown to the floor, and ligaments in her leg had been torn from being forced into contorted sexual positions (FiLiA, 2023).

There is a close relationship between financial control and drug use; many women are coerced into prostitution to support a partner’s drug habit. The use of substances become a viscous cycle: women use substances to numb the pain of prostitution, but escalated drug use requires more money to be found.

Psychological, administrative, and economic violence manifest in debt bondage. Pimps[[1]](#footnote-1) (e.g., strip club, brothel, agency, online service) have control over women’s time; they dictate the ‘service’ provided; and decide what renumeration is provided, if any (Farley, 2023; APPG, 2018). More than 80% of the time, women in the sex industry are under pimp control (Farley, 2015).

## 7. What links are there between pornography and/or other forms of sexual exploitation and prostitution?

Pornography is filmed prostitution. As with prostitution, women are frequently coerced into pornography. This can take the form of deception; for example, women are told they are due to work as a model or actress but are pressured or forced into sexual acts. Survivors report being raped and violently assaulted whilst filming pornography. In some instances, women used in pornography sign contracts before filming begins. This is purportedly a ‘safeguarding’ measure, but in fact eliminates women’s ability to withdraw consent during the sex act, resulting in rape.

There have been significant changes in the pornography industry over the years. We now see most sexual exploitation taking place online. Subscription websites (e.g., OnlyFans) masquerade as entrepreneurial platforms that provide greater independence than traditional studio pornography, despite their ‘creators’ being left with as little as 10% of their earnings (Nealon, 2022). This is societal grooming of a generation of young women on a mass scale. Women and girls are bombarded with overt and subliminal messages that their worth is defined by their online presence, and more importantly, whether they are sexually lusted over by men. Thus, their sexuality is lauded a commodity to be traded. Moreover, the sex industry’s ‘categorisation’ of women perpetuates racist stereotypes and promotes the fetishization of minoritized women.

Survivors tell us how they start out in the sex trade by making pornography (perceiving it as somehow safer) but soon move into ‘full service’ prostitution. The only differences in their experiences of prostitution and pornography are often the presence of a camera. Through FiLiA’s exchange project in Japan, we have seen this first hand. Working with women and girls in the red-light districts of Tokyo has demonstrated that pornography and prostitution are indistinguishable from each other.

## 8. How is the issue of consent dealt with? Is it possible to speak about meaningful consent for prostituted women and girls?

Involvement in prostitution is overwhelmingly the result of a *lack* of choice in a woman or girl’s life.  Whilst every woman and girl’s pathway into prostitution will be different, most enter as part of a historic and ongoing process of abuse, vulnerability, and structural inequality. Once involved in prostitution, they are frequently subjected to coercion and exploitation by pimps and punters (Home Office, 2006).

The UK Sexual Offences Act 2003 defines consent as [*sic*] “if he agrees by choice, and has the freedom and capacity to make that choice” (CPS, 2021). Consent, legally, is freely given; that is, *free of coercion*. Prostitution is inherently financially coercive through the exchange of sexual acts for money. 75% of women state poverty as a motivating factor for their involvement in prostitution (WGN, n.d.). Crucially, women in prostitution would not have sex with buyers if there was not financial incentive. Prostitution therefore cannot be considered consensual sex; it is, by law, rape.

Survivors have described the description of prostitution as ‘work’ – and particularly the term ‘sex work’ – as “gaslighting”. They argue that this term sanitises and makes invisible the coercion and violence involved (Women First, 2022).

Some survivors have described their initial ‘free choice’ to enter the industry, though this soon resulted in violence and exploitation (FiLiA, 2023a). In order to make money, women in prostitution are forced to modulate their ‘boundaries’ and perform sex acts that make them uncomfortable, resulting in a loss of bodily autonomy and often physical injury.

It is common that women in prostitution are unable to recognise the physical and sexual violence done to them as abuse until they have exited, because of its frequency and normalisation. Even so, very few state that they have never had an abusive client. The pro-prostitution slogan of ‘sex work is work’ therefore acts as a coercive tool to obscure the power dynamics of prostitution and market sexual exploitation as an empowering ‘career’ to women, ignoring the startlingly common risks to women’s safety.

Women describe wanting to exit prostitution but find themselves unable to do so due to a myriad of factors. It is worth noting that in other domains where people are subject to harm (i.e., domestic abuse, trafficking) narratives around consent and victim-blaming are proactively challenged. Yet within the sex trade, this is often not the case. This is in part based on the misguided perception that women can ‘consent’ to being prostituted. A survivor has shared, that she “Wanted to exit since the first day of working … it was so horrendous … it was man after man after man, it was like being raped continuously” (Women First, 2022). Women’s inability to exit the sex trade testifies to the lack of freedom and capacity to ‘consent’ to prostitution.

## 11. What measures are in place to assist and support women and girls who wish to leave prostitution?

Few of the services delivered to women in the sex trade will enable them to exit it.  The complex needs of prostituted women are well documented (including survivors of trauma and extreme violence; women with unmet mental health needs and chronic addiction). Yet the response in terms of service design is rarely tailored to meet their needs and fails to demonstrate any understanding of the barriers a woman may face in accessing help. For example, service appointments can be hard to attend if a woman has been up throughout the night, and her phone is likely be controlled by a pimp or coercive male.

Support provided in the evenings is often delivered by volunteers. For example, local soup-runs or church related outreach. This can be important work in ameliorating the condition of women in prostitution but fails to provide structural support that will enable women to exit.

Commissioned services are usually framed within the context of sexual health, such as condoms or BBV screening. The UK does not have any minimum commissioning standards and women are falling through the gaps.

Nearly half of the practitioners (48%) surveyed via Women First did not ask women about their involvement in the sex trade. This was due to a lack of services to refer the women on to.

## 12. What are the obstacles faced by organisations and frontline service providers in their mission to support victims and survivors of prostitution?

Due to their complex needs, it can be difficult for this community of women to access mainstream services, e.g., mental health support, physical health care, housing, or addiction treatment. Even if they do manage to access them, a generic service response is frequently inadequate for women who have been involved in prostitution.  Effective service provision needs to be flexible, responsive and truly trauma informed. Single-sex spaces and services are particularly important for survivors of prostitution.

Women need to be able to tap into practical help (e.g., accommodation, financial support) quickly and easily. They also need the opportunity to access interventions that may enable them to begin the trauma recovery process, such as EMDR.

This is a group of women who are often described as ‘hard to reach’, but the truth is sometimes simply that they have become ‘easy to ignore’.

Additionally, a lack of funding, coupled with a lack of understanding of the harms of the sex trade, inhibit the provision of useful services. l

## 13. What are some of the lessons learned about what works and what does not when it comes to stemming any negative human rights consequences from the prostitution of women and girls?

The Nordic Model (also known as the Equality Model) criminalises the purchase and pimping of women for the sex of prostitution, without penalising those used for sex in prostitution. It has been adopted in Sweden, France, Canada, Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, Israel, Norway, and Iceland. In Sweden, the Nordic Model has led to reduction in street prostitution, a decrease in demand for paid sex, and has hindered the establishment of sex traffickers (Swedish Gender Equality Agency, 2022).

Evidence from other sources similarly finds that the Nordic Model has been effective in reducing men’s demand for prostitution of women and girls. (Coy et al 2016; Waltman, 2011; Ekberg, 2004). Therefore, the Nordic Model strengthens the human rights of women and girls against the dehumanisation of sexual servitude.

In contrast, the legalisation of prostitution in countries like Germany, the Netherlands, and New Zealand as commercial sex has increased sex trafficking to meet high demand (Cho et al., 2013), exacerbated violence by pimps and punters who exercise state-endorsed entitlement on prostituted women (Daalder, 2007; CAP, 2012), and has led to neglect of important support services like exit in policy (Bindel, 2018). Therefore, the legalisation of prostitution enables the violation of the human rights of women and girls to freedom, self-determination, non-discrimination, and liberty (CEDAW 1979; ICCPR and ICESCR; UNDHR 1948)

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1. The term ‘pimp’ is used to refer to any individual or organisation that profiteers off the prostitution of another. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)