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Sex industry survivor and author.

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Dear Ms. Reem Alsalem/Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls,

I am writing to you as a sex industry/prostitution survivor and an author. I’m the author of a memoir about my time in the industry ([*Body Shell Girl*](https://www.spinifexpress.com.au/shop/p/9781925950502) Spinifex Press, 2022), and recently I wrote [an article for the ABC](https://www.abc.net.au/religion/south-australia-parliament-sex-work-hearing-survivor-voices/103374298), which is a major news outlet here in Australia, regarding my survivor-based support of the Nordic Model approach to this industry.

Here I will address the actions I think states should take (namely, I think they should take the Nordic Model approach), clarify some terms, and address the link between violence against women and the sex industry—as indicated in your [objectives](https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2024/call-input-report-special-rapporteur-violence-against-women-and-girls-human). A lot of what I’ve included here is taken from other articles and talks I’ve written (I’m plagiarising myself)—especially my recent ABC article. I hope that’s okay—I don’t quite have it in me to write all this over again in different words.

I was in the sex industry for ten years, mostly in Canada.

On the surface, it appeared I was in a “better” situation than many. I wasn’t trafficked, I wasn’t underage when I started, I worked in-house rather than on the streets, and I wasn’t in “full-service” (to use the industry euphemism) work for most of my time in the trade. Yet even with those comparative advantages, I found it almost impossible to leave the industry once I was in it, and it almost killed me.

I agree with the radical feminist position (I would call it the only true feminist position)—that the sex industry/prostitution is violence against women. Full decriminalisation proponents argue that the industry can be made safe, or safer, for women. My experience of the industry was that it can never be made safe for the vast majority of women that labour in it. I agree with academic Meagan Tyler, who argues that if we are going to call this industry “work” we should acknowledge it constitutes a [“form of unacceptable work.”](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10301763.2020.1847806) I am in favour of the Nordic Model (also sometimes called the Equality Model, or the Abolitionist Law) approach to this industry. The Nordic Model, as you are no doubt aware, is a system of partial decriminalisation—it decriminalises sex sellers (mostly women), and imposes penalties on sex buyers (mostly men), and pimps. It also offers assistance, or exit programs, for those who want to leave the sex industry.

I support this model because in my experience the vast majority of women in this industry are extremely disadvantaged. In my experience the industry was full of traumatised women. A line I heard a lot, and that I used myself, was, “It’s just my body.” At the time I never questioned the lack of self-care this statement represents. So many of us get into the sex industry because our prior traumatic experiences have given us the “ability” to dissociate our way through abuse. We’re traumatised when we start in the industry, then we get traumatised further by the industry—which then drags us down more, making it extremely hard to get out.

When I say the sex industry is a trauma industry for women, I’m not talking primarily about the trauma caused by the worst buyers. I’m talking about the trauma women experience on a daily basis in this industry. I was raped in a brothel, but the most intensely distressing thought I couldn’t get out of my head afterwards was this: Was this rape really so different to all the other times I’d been penetrated by penises in this brothel? After all, none of them were wanted —not one.

This is another way of saying “my consent was repeatedly bought,” and it is what some radical feminists and many survivors mean when they say the sex industry is [“paid rape.”](https://unherd.com/2020/07/how-authorities-in-leeds-enable-paid-rape/) I’m sometimes cautious with that statement because I recognise there are other situations in which people (especially women) have sex they don’t want to have—for example, to placate a partner. However, imagine doing that multiple times most days, and with different men each time, who you wouldn’t dream of having unpaid sex with, and who are in many cases physically or emotionally repulsive to you? Imagine having unwanted hands groping you and pinching you and unwanted mouths all over you and unwanted penises in your mouth and vagina (again and again, for hours in total on a standard brothel shift)?

Then add to that the necessity to pretend you’re enjoying it—which most buyers of sex demand either explicitly or implicitly, and some will get violent or complain to “management” (aka pimps) if you don’t comply (this was my experience, and it is also supported by [academic research](https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1077801218757375)). Consider the physical, mental, and emotional toll all this would take on you. Does this sound like an acceptable form of work to you? There is no way to prevent this trauma, because this trauma is the nature of the work.

Of course, there are a few women in the industry who, for various reasons (for example, another source of income), can work sparingly and pick and choose their buyers, thereby lessening some of the trauma. These women are quite often featured in the media in my country (Australia), giving the public the false impression that their situation is the norm for women in this industry. But this is just not the reality for most women in the sex trade. Policy be decided with reference to the majority, not the exceptions.

Indigenous women and women of colour are over-represented in the sex trade, as well as women who are unhoused, women experiencing domestic abuse, and women who suffer from addictions. This has been demonstrated in such works as the critical anthology [*Prostitution, Trafficking, and Traumatic Stress*](https://www.routledge.com/Prostitution-Trafficking-and-Traumatic-Stress/Farley-PhD/p/book/9780789023797), and it was also what I observed and experienced. I became an alcoholic and a sedative addict. For some of the time I was in a relationship with a violent man—so many of us were. I got used to being treated like an object in the sex industry and I found that same dynamic in my personal relationships. Once again, full decriminalisation can’t change any of this because it can’t change the nature of the work.

And then there was the constant stress—including anxieties over disease. Condoms are not one hundred percent effective, and some buyers will try to “stealth” them off. What acceptable form of work involves having your body penetrated and exposed to other people’s bodily fluids and the risk of disease? Over and over? How can you ever make that safe? I’ve worked in brothels where you were supposed to examine the buyer’s penis under a lamp beforehand. This is not a full solution because the worst things you can catch don’t show up in plain sight. Nor is compulsory testing for the women and not the sex buyers.

It is important to note that I and other proponents of the Nordic Model do not refer to the industry as “sex work,” because we deem this legitimising language that functions to sanitise and camouflage the harsh realities of the industry for those who labour in it. (Note that the word “sex work” has been added to the title of my ABC article by the publication—I did not write it, and I did not have control over this editorial decision.) Similarly, Nordic Model proponents don’t use the word “clients” to refer to sex buyers, because the word “clients” suggests buying services in this industry is like buying services from a lawyer or a marketing consultant. I trust what I’ve mentioned so far goes some way toward demonstrating that it is not. I do use the term “sex industry”—as a term that both Nordic Model supporters and full decrim supporters are able to use. It may sound like it’s not far removed from the term “sex work”—but at least the term “sex industry” has not been used for all the “sex work” ideology mantras, such as “sex work is real work” or “sex work is a job like any other” (it is not). The academic Robert Jensen uses the term “sexual-exploitation industry”—which I like a lot too and sometimes use as well.

Back when I was in the industry, I did not criticise it much. As many trauma experts point out, a situation can be awful and feel familiar, it can be awful and feel like home—just like you’re used to. And many of us will defend that awful home too, the same as many people in other types of abuse situations do. As mentioned, I’ve experienced domestic violence as well, and the defences I came up with back then about that were very similar to what I said regarding the sex industry. It’s not that bad... It’s just my body—not my soul. Sometimes he is nice. You even get the occasional gift. And, one that was always the kicker for me: it’s my fault anyway, for not leaving.

The sex industry is paid abuse, although when I was in it I couldn’t always see that. Because it’s very difficult when you’re in the middle of a trauma situation, to see it clearly. Again, domestic violence is a good comparison. We see women (like me) go back to these abusive men. We know this happens. We don’t (or most us these days don’t) tell these women—well it’s your “choice” to go back, so that must mean what he’s doing is fine with us. Instead, most of us understand there is coercive control going on here, there’s financial control, there are the effects of trauma, there are children—there are a range of factors that keep women going back to abusive situations. None of it means the abusers should be decriminalised.

The longer I stayed in the industry the worse my other employment options got. My sense of self-worth plummeted. I became convinced that I would die at age thirty-six. Now there really was no point trying to build any kind of future for myself. I now know having a sense of a foreshortened future is a symptom of PTSD, but I couldn’t see this at the time.

When I finally did get out of the industry, life got even worse. I descended even further into alcoholism and addiction and got involved with another violent man who I hoped would kill me (he nearly did). As fellow sex trade survivor Rachel Moran [writes in her memoir](https://www.spinifexpress.com.au/shop/p/9781742198620?rq=Paid%20For), “on leaving prostitution, I swapped the daily living of it for the daily reeling from it.”

I couldn’t get over the trauma I’d experienced because I had no language with which to name it. All the messages I got from the prevailing “sex work” ideology told me this work was fine — “a job like any other.” So what was my problem?

I was gaslit by full decriminalisation ideology.

I support the Nordic Model because, in my ten years in the sex industry, I never saw an exit service, or even dreamed I might deserve such a service—and I so wish I had.

I support the Nordic Model because, in my experience, the sex industry cannot be made safe for women—either physically or psychologically. It is not, and cannot be made into, acceptable work. To say that it can is to gaslight women and girls.

I support the Nordic Model because it describes a society I want to live in—a society in which men’s paid sexual use and abuse of disadvantaged and traumatised women is not acceptable and it is not tolerated by our laws.

Many thanks for reading.

Rose.

\* As mentioned, sections of what I say here are taken from my ABC article, “South Australia is considering the legal status of sex work — it’s imperative that we listen to the experience of survivors,” 22 Jan 2024,

<https://www.abc.net.au/religion/south-australia-parliament-sex-work-hearing-survivor-voices/103374298>.