

National and international women's organisations stand together in support of Northern Ireland's progressive anti-trafficking law

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For immediate release

Following the release on September 18th, 2019, of research commissioned by Northern Ireland's Department of Justice and carried out by Queen's University into section 15 of the [Northern Ireland Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act 2015](#), national and international women's rights organisations have come together in support of the existing law.

Under this section, Northern Ireland became the first jurisdiction in the UK to make paying for sexual services a criminal offence.

Northern Ireland's legislation provides a strong foundation for actions to address sexual exploitation and human trafficking, however there have been considerable barriers to effective implementation of the new law.

In the report, "[Assessment of impact criminalisation of purchasing sexual services](#)", we disagree with the Queen's researchers' conclusion that the law criminalising the purchase of sexual services is ineffective, rather it is effective implementation which needs to be further developed. Despite the barriers, PSNI statistics show that there have been more crimes recorded and more arrests and consequences for those who have committed the new offence than there were for the previous offence of paying for sex with a person subject to force, showing that the police can and do use this law to a positive effect. We welcome the comment from the PSNI that the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act is "a useful piece of legislation." We welcome new training initiatives being developed by the PSNI and call on all other relevant agencies to make implementation of the Act a priority.

Financial and administrative barriers have meant that the Leaving Prostitution Strategy mandated by the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act has not noticeably improved access to support for women involved in and leaving prostitution outside of the National Referral Mechanism for human trafficking victims.

The lack of access to support services is of particular concern given that social security reforms, such as Universal Credit, are having negative effects on women in Northern Ireland, particularly victims and survivors of violence and abuse. These reforms have increased the risk of women living in or facing the threat of poverty, leaving them particularly vulnerable to sexual and other forms of exploitation.

We urge the responsible ministries to:

- take steps to strengthen their strategies, capacity building of and guidance to the relevant public agencies,
- increase resources to ensure effective implementation the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act
- provide strategic development and adequate resources for the Leaving Prostitution Strategy.

The conclusions of the Queen's University research suggesting negative impacts of the law are based on a flawed methodology in which the voices and experiences of the most vulnerable and exploited people, mostly women, in prostitution are neither heard nor reflected. The voices of women trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation, and those who have exited the prostitution industry are almost entirely absent from the report.

The conclusions also appear to reflect the long-established views of the researchers about the impact of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation Act which they articulated publicly prior to the law's introduction in 2015.

Women's Aid Northern Ireland:

"We are supporting more and more women who are experiencing sexual exploitation both as victims of Human Trafficking and local women who are being forced into prostitution by partners, this highlights the rise in demand.

"Whilst this report, just as the one produced in 2014, indicates that women have a choice and are content to live this lifestyle, it could not be further from the truth. The women we support are traumatised and abused and have long term psychological ill health as a result of their ordeals.

"A clearly defined strategic approach is the only way forward to alleviate the pain and suffering of the women involved. We support all the new initiatives that PSNI and others have introduced to support this Bill."

Institute for Feminism & Human Rights:

"The lack of support in this research for legal and other measures that discourage the demand for women for the purpose of sexual exploitation is particularly disturbing. Discouraging demand is an approach that is obligatory under international human trafficking treaties and proven to be effective in preventing the sexual exploitation of women in a number of other countries. "

Equality Now:

"We find it deeply concerning that a report commissioned to review Section 15 of the Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Act 2015 (Northern Ireland) devotes only 5 out of 177 pages to the issue of human trafficking. The voices of trafficking survivors and professionals who support them are noticeably absent.

"Sex trafficking, which is fueled by demand for commercial sex, is an issue which disproportionately affects women. Section 15 of the Act seeks to address inequality between men who pay for sexual services, and women, as well as other marginalized groups disproportionately found in prostitution. Thus the law works to promote equality where there is none and protect those who are more vulnerable. This is in line with Northern Ireland's obligations under international human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 2000 United Nations Palermo Protocol."

Ruhama:

"It seems the law is actually having an impact on sex buyers' behaviour as 38% said they would either reduce or stop buying sex altogether. The report also highlights how buyers are primary perpetrators of violence against women in the sex trade, as indicated by incidences of violence both before and after 2015. There must be increased resources put into effective enforcement of the legislation going forward in Northern Ireland, alongside the provision of comprehensive exit supports as the majority wish to exit prostitution at some stage."

Ends

Notes to editors

Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland

Women's Aid is the lead voluntary organisation in Northern Ireland addressing domestic and sexual violence and providing services for women and children.

Website: <https://www.womensaidni.org/>

Contact information: info@womensaidni.org

Ruhama

Ruhama is Ireland's only dedicated frontline organisation supporting women affected by prostitution and sex trafficking. In 2018 we worked with 313 women from 40 countries, providing them with a wide range of confidential, non-judgemental person-centred supports. We also work to change attitudes and public policies regarding prostitution and, as members of the Turn Off the Red Light campaign, we advocated for the introduction of legislation in the Republic of Ireland to decriminalise individuals in prostitution and criminalise sex buyers.

Website: www.ruhama.ie

Contact: admin@ruhama.ie

Institute for Feminism & Human Rights

The Institute for Feminism & Human Rights (IF&HR) is an international not-for-profit policy and research institute based in Sweden with members in a number of countries in Europe and internationally. IF&HR works to prevent and eliminate the socioeconomic, legal and political discrimination of women and girls through the use of Feminist strategies and research methods, and the application of international, regional and national human rights instruments. IF&HR uses the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) as a point of departure in much of its advocacy work in Europe and internationally.

Website: <https://feminismandhumanrights.org>

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Equality Now, United Kingdom

Equality Now is an international human rights organisation that works to protect and promote the rights of women and girls around the world by combining grassroots activism with international, regional and national legal advocacy. Our international network of lawyers, activists and supporters work to hold governments accountable to their commitments to end legal inequality, sex trafficking, sexual violence and harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation.

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