

WOMEN'S AID

Presentation to Joint Oireachtás Committee on Justice, Equality and Defence: on the Review of Legislation on Prostitution 16/01/2013

By Margaret Martin, Director and Monica Mazzone, Policy and Communications
Manager

Women's Aid welcomes the opportunity to present today at this meeting of the Joint Committee on Justice in relation to the review of legislation of prostitution in Ireland.

Women's Aid is a leading national organisation that has been working in Ireland to stop domestic violence against women and children since 1974.

Women's Aid runs the National Freephone Helpline (1800 341 900) which operates from 10am to 10pm, every day and provides support and information to callers experiencing abuse from intimate partners. We also provide face to face support visits and court accompaniment in the greater Dublin area.

Women's Aid is part of the Turn Off the Red Light campaign to end prostitution and sex trafficking in Ireland. Some leading members of the campaign have already presented to this Committee on last December 12th. We will not go over what has already been said by them, but we will try to focus on the links between prostitution and domestic violence. In particular we will focus on domestic violence as factor of entry into prostitution and the similarities and common vulnerabilities between these two forms of violence against women.

Women's Aid supports legislation that criminalises the buyer while supporting the seller because we believe that prostitution is a form of violence against women, in many ways similar to domestic violence. Both are violation of human rights and a barrier to gender equality.



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Like women experiencing domestic violence, women engaged in prostitution experience physical, sexual, psychological and financial abuse.

The issue of control is central in both situations. The isolation, emotional and financial dependency, the threats and the use of actual violence are tactics that we also see in our work.

The words of a woman exploited in prostitution reported in the Paying the price reportⁱ are strikingly similar to what women experiencing domestic violence tell us every day:

For my second pimp there was no way I could finish work without having at least £200 every day.... I didn't have a penny of it. He chose my clothes....he chose my food, he told me when to eat, when to sleep, when to work, when to go home, when to speak. I just could not do anything without his permission (Frances)

Like women experiencing domestic violence, women in prostitution experience a range of extremely harmful effects from this violence which include psychological harm such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, depression, low self-confidence, as well as physical harm and severe injuries.

The two issues conflate when the intimate partner of the woman is the person coercing her into prostitution.

In our Helpline and face to face work we sometimes hear of women experiencing domestic violence who are forced by their abusive partner to work as prostitutes on the streets or who are coerced by their partner to have sex with other persons in exchange for money or for drugs.

Conversely Ruhama confirmed with us that they also have come across the issue of grooming or direct coercion into prostitution by an intimate partner in the work they do with women involved in prostitution.



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Intimate partner abuse by a partner/pimp is often a reality for women engaged in prostitution.

A US study of 113 street sex workers found that 73% of the women who were in an intimate relationship experienced physical or sexual abuse from intimate partners over the lifetime and 22% over the previous yearⁱⁱ.

A small study of homeless women in Nottingham found that “all of the nine ‘working girls’ interviewed volunteered the information that they had felt coerced into sex work by their partners - typically, abusive and violent men. Although the women were not prepared to have their comments recorded in this area, it is significant that seven out of the nine women who had sex-worked had experienced domestic violence. Although based on a small convenience sample, this figure of 78 per cent is striking when compared to the estimate of 26 per cent across the whole of the female population in the UK experiencing domestic violence”.ⁱⁱⁱ

We also hear at times of women experiencing or escaping domestic violence who are forced into prostitution by the lack of any other income generation opportunity. We know that poverty and lack of access to money and resources makes women vulnerable to entry into prostitution.

Financial abuse is often part of domestic violence, with women having no access to household money for themselves and their children. After separation non-payment of Maintenance can be a huge issue. Some of the women we work with are not entitled to welfare benefits and to social housing and may find themselves in extreme poverty. We do at times hear that women have to resort to prostitution to provide for themselves and their children.

We do know that domestic violence is a major cause of homelessness for women and that being homeless makes women and children more vulnerable to prostitution.

A study of 60 homeless women in Ireland published in 2012^{iv} found that 72% of the women had experienced violence and abuse in childhood and two thirds had experience intimate partner violence. 9 women (or 15%) had engaged in sex work as means of generating income.



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We also know that child abuse and domestic violence often co-occur and that many women engaged in prostitution have experienced physical and/or sexual abuse in the family. The Paying the Price report states that 85% of women in prostitution report physical abuse in the family, with 45% reporting familial sexual abuse. It also concludes that “Given their vulnerability, children who have been affected by domestic violence are likely to be over-represented among children abused through prostitution”^v.

The majority of women, children and men who are engaged in prostitution have not freely chosen to be there and would like to exit. Other TORL members have previously referred to the very young age at which women get involved in prostitution; most of them when they are still underage.

In this respect we are very concerned about the trend of so called “loverboys” that we have highlighted in our written submission and that has also been mentioned by Barnardos. Vulnerable young girls are groomed and coerced into prostitution by older boyfriends.

Moreover the UK report quoted above also state that:

“There is evidence to show that there are shifting patterns in the way in which prostitution is operating. The trend is away from pimps controlling a number of women and towards ‘pimp/partner’ relationships”.^{vi}

Unfortunately there is a paucity of research on this issue in Ireland.

A recent article on women in Northern Ireland involved in prostitution outlines the similarities and links between domestic violence and prostitution, especially with reference to the cycle of entrapment into prostitution and the cycle of domestic abuse and concludes that:

“Overall, the similarities between domestic abuse and prostitution are clear, suggesting that any initiative to support women involved in prostitution should have input from experts in the field of domestic violence, and strategies on domestic violence should be consulted to enable a better understanding of its link to prostitution.”^{vii}



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We know from our experience with domestic violence that the law can be a powerful instrument to change attitudes and set the limits of what is and is not acceptable in society. We also know that legislative change, while vital, is not enough on its own and that support services and access to housing and welfare supports are equally important to offer viable exit strategies.

Women's Aid believes that prostitution is intrinsically exploitative, harmful and violent and that it is best tackled by targeting demand. Targeting the sex buyer sends a clear message that buying sex is not socially acceptable and therefore we support the call for introducing legislation based on the Swedish model. Women's Aid recommends criminalising the purchase of sex whilst at the same time de-criminalising those who sell sexual acts and offering support services to people in prostitution.

End.

ⁱ Home Office, *Paying the Price: a consultation paper*, Home Office Communication Directorate, July 2004

ⁱⁱ El-Bassel, N., Witte, S., Wada, T., Gilbert, L. and Wallace, J. (2001) 'Correlates of partner violence among female street-based sex workers: Substance abuse, history of childhood abuse, and HIV risks', *AIDS Patient Care and STDs*, 15(1), pp. 41–51

ⁱⁱⁱ Harding, R. and Hamilton, P. (2009), 'Working Girls: Abuse or Choice in Street-Level Sex Work?', *British Journal of Social Work*, vol. 39, pp. 1118–1137

^{iv} Mayock, P. and Sheridan, S. (2012) *Women's 'Journeys' to Homelessness: Key Findings from a Biographical Study of Homeless Women in Ireland*. Women and Homelessness in Ireland, Research Paper 1. Dublin: School of Social Work and Social Policy and Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin

^v Home Office, *Paying the Price: a consultation paper*, Home Office Communication Directorate, July 2004

^{vi} *ibidem* IRISH PROBATION JOURNAL Volume 8, October 2011

^{vii} Hawthorne, E. *Women in Northern Ireland Involved in Prostitution*,

