



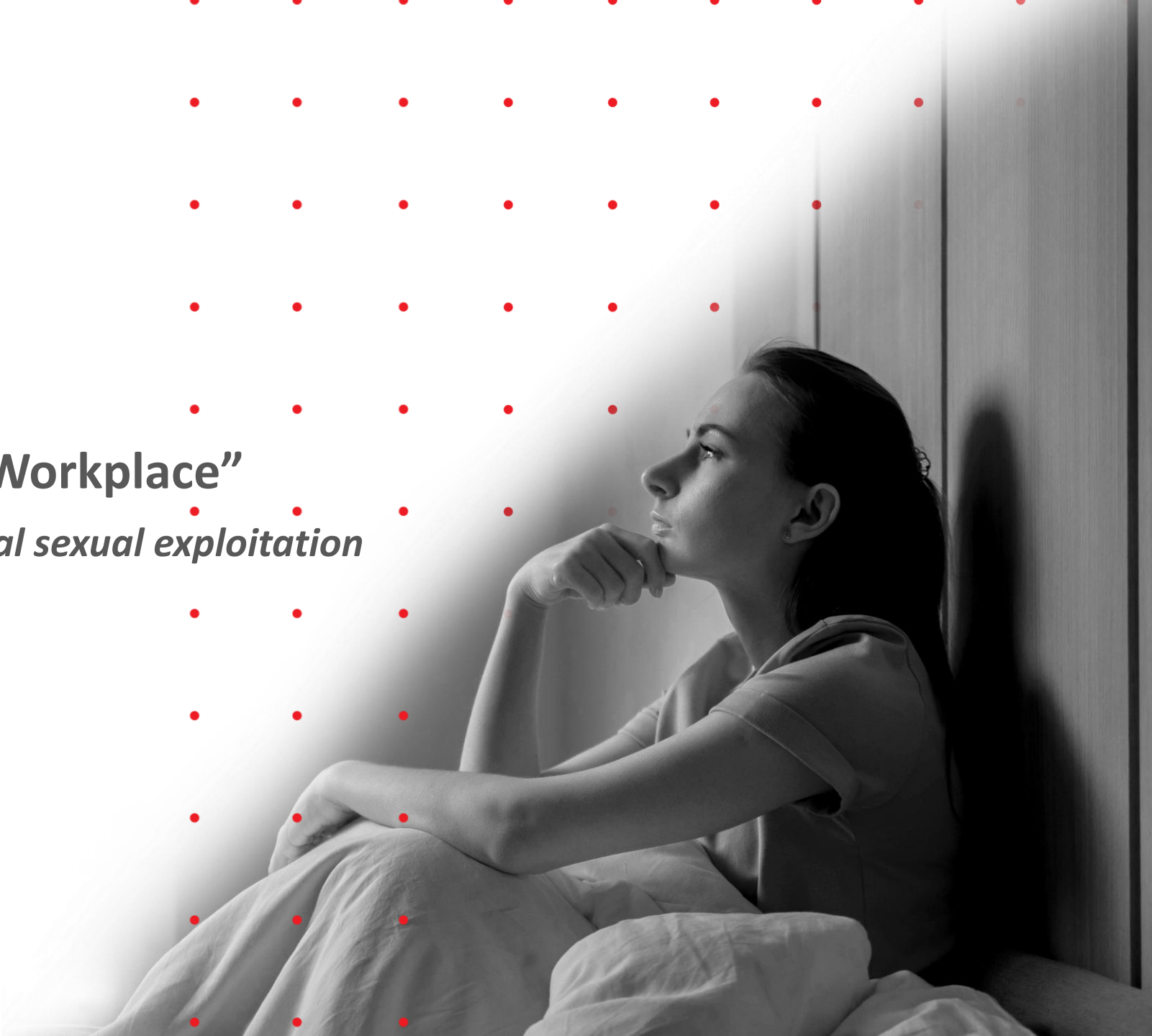
THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION
RESEARCH AND POLICY INSTITUTE

“A Woman’s Body is Not a Workplace”

Sharing the evidence on commercial sexual exploitation

Ruth Breslin, Director

www.serp.ie



**A 'divided discourse':
Sex work or Sexual exploitation?**

The evidence

- SERP 2018-2024: 8 studies on the Irish sex trade – justice, health, Covid-19, gender equality, children, exiting prostitution, the role of technology, and pornography
- 100s of service user records, medical files, case studies, interviews with frontline support professionals, police, health, social work and social care professionals, CSO crime statistics, analysis of public health advice, press reporting, analysis of prostitution advertising and 1000s of buyer reviews, interviews with women currently involved & survivors
- In collaboration with the major frontline services

Prostitution: Sex work or Sexual exploitation?

- The 3 'actors' in the sex trade and their profiles
- The impacts of prostitution
- The issue of consent
- The issue of violence
- Is this work?
- The impact of the legislation

The key actors

- The women
- The sex buyers
- The 'organisers'



The women

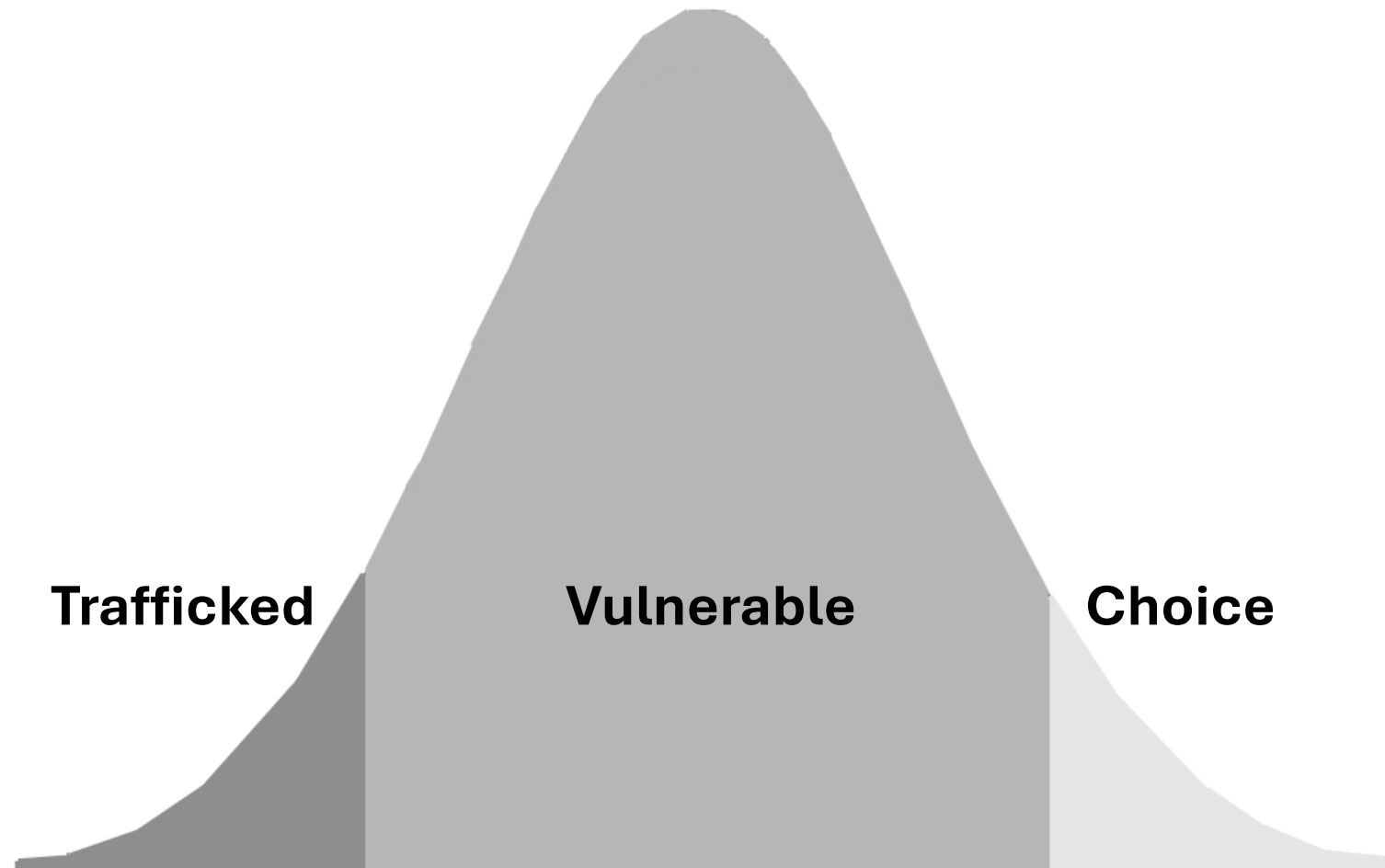
Profile – RoI & NI

- Persons exploited in prostitution and pornography production
- 90% + migrant women; smaller group of vulnerable local women
- 40+ nationalities: Latin America, Central & Eastern Europe, Africa & Asia
- 900+ advertised daily online, in off-street locations
- Young - 1/3 advertised are aged 18-25
- Almost one fifth drawn into the trade under age 18
- Entry: Coercion / Poverty / Both
- Limited to no English
- Insecure immigration status
- Highly mobile / 'On tour' / NFA – 'no fixed abode'
- Extreme social isolation

Table 2: Experiences of adversities prior to entry into prostitution

	Lilian	Angela	Odele	Emily	Abigail	Sade	Rose	Nallah	Amara	Larisa	Eme	Total
Living in poverty		✓		✓	✓		✓		✓		✓	6
Child sexual abuse			✓			✓	✓		✓	✓		5
Abusive intimate relationship					✓		✓	✓			✓	4
Homelessness			✓	✓			✓		✓			4
Single parenthood	✓				✓	✓			✓			4
Early school leaver		✓		✓	✓				✓			4
Substance misuse			✓	✓			✓					3
Child neglect									✓	✓		2
Mental health problems				✓								1
Total	1	2	3	5	4	2	5	1	6	2	2	33

Profile of persons in the sex trade



Entry into prostitution

“And I left school without anything – there was no social welfare for me... I couldn’t hold down a job... But when you have no money, it’s there. You’re on the street... There’s just some way that a man will contact you. And do you know what, fifty euro [is much needed]... I remember thinking in my head, ‘I’m so young, I’m so young’... I was always a vulnerable [girl]... I was so disgusted with my body... I’m 14... I was like drinking... because there’s no way I could do this sober.” ‘Emily’

The sex buyers

The sex buyers

- Irish, married/in a relationship, well-educated, incomes above average
- Rate women out of '5 stars' – 'appearance', 'satisfaction', 'value for money'
- Commodification/objectification of women's bodies
- Motivated by a sense of sexual entitlement and pursuit of their own desires
- Perpetuation of racial and ethnic stereotypes
- A stark power imbalance between buyer & seller = **sexual exploitation**

In the buyers' words...

'I was indeed misled here as good English on phone but none when I got there but I was met by a much older and much larger woman saying she was [woman's name in the profile] through Google translate on her mobile...'

hunterhilman; 05/06/20

'she does not offer OWO or FK [French kissing] as advertised. She said that her 'booker' does the profile' *Speedbird0074; 05/06/20*

'...had a feeling this time it was done for money rather than customer pleasure...I had to do all the work this time as well. Barely any pleasure and I was asked if I was done. Hate being pushed. We're supposed to enjoy it.'

damian01211; 18/07/20

'Service unfortunately was rushed as she's clearly too busy. In and out in ten minutes...my hand unfortunately had to be the tool in the end.'

Pizzaboy21; 14/07/20

In the buyers' words...

Outcome

No service

Accuracy of photos	★☆☆☆☆	Satisfaction	★☆☆☆☆	Value for money	★☆☆☆☆
Physical appearance	★☆☆☆☆	Overall experience	★☆☆☆☆		

Would repeat?

Recommended

04/08/2025 at 01:30

45 minutes

Location hidden

I had a terrible experience and was treated very poorly. Her favorites don't match her performance. She doesn't tell you about her extra services until later, and even then, after seeing them, it's not worth the advertised price. I preferred to take a shower first, and she started timing me, putting pressure on me from the start. In the end, she threw my backpack away while I was just talking. I don't recommend this service to anyone.

★★★★☆

Outcome

Completed

Accuracy of photos	★★★★☆	Satisfaction	★★★★☆	Location	★★★★☆
Value for money	★★★★☆	Physical appearance	★★★★☆	Overall experience	★★★★☆

Would repeat?

Recommended

05/09/2025 at 14:00

1 hour

€200.00

Northern Cross

Young and pretty was friendly and welcoming. Nice enough apartment and was clean.

Asked for extra fee at beginning which I gave after that it was poor to mediocre, little intimacy, restrictive, no kissing at all, no gentle touches, no stroking all very disappointing, like that girlfriend you might have had in your early twenties who was just lazy at trying to make it enjoyable

The 'organisers'

The 'organisers'

- A trade worth €180 million per annum
- Organised crime gangs – domestic and international
- Organised movement of women, presence of 'bookers' and pimps
- Women with no control over buyers, how advertised, sex acts
- Gang activities – organising prostitution + robbery, blackmail, credit card cloning, the supply of illegal drugs, money laundering, fraud & cybercrime
- Other profiteers – advertisers, landlords etc.
- Violence – used as a means to coerce, control & eliminate 'competition'

The profiteers

- Traffickers earning €190,000 per annum per woman they have exploited

🕒 Enticed from Brazil on the promise of high earnings, the women were advertised to Irish sex buyers online & had to engage with them in person from 9.40am to 3/4am EVERY DAY, with just one 'day off' per month

🕒 One of the gang's victims reported having to see up to 12 sex buyers per day, & none of the women could refuse buyers

🕒 The women were not allowed to leave the houses (brothels) where the gang had located them overnight & were only permitted to leave at all on two occasions per week

🕒 If women returned later than agreed they were fined by their 'bosses' - sometimes up to €150. They were also fined for other 'misdemeanors' like playing music too loudly

🕒 The majority of the money handed over by sex buyers went straight into gang members' accounts - who were said to be profiting to the tune of €15,800 every month from EACH woman they were sexually exploiting

🕒 The women reported being degraded, sleep-deprived & verbally abused by the gang. When any woman did manage to extricate herself from their control, she was quickly replaced by another young woman from Brazil.

The impacts

Sexual and reproductive health impacts of prostitution

- 28 different sexual and reproductive health issues – reoccurring, requiring repeat attendances and repeat/ongoing treatment
- Women facing higher risks of contracting STIs than the general population – HPV and chlamydia most commonly detected
- Crisis pregnancies and one or more terminations whilst in prostitution

Sexual & reproductive health - Presenting issues

Complaint	No. of times presented	No. of women
Vaginal discomfort/discharge/odour	70	31
Candida (commonly known as 'thrush')	38	22
Pain when urinating (dysuria)	23	14
Bacterial Vaginosis (BV)	22	15
Abdominal/pelvic pain	19	12
Pregnancy concerns	19	13
Bleeding (vaginal)	18	13
Blisters/sores (genital)	12	6
Chlamydia	12	10
HPV (Human Papilloma Virus)	11	5

Buyers' demands and behaviours

- Majority of women are doing all they can to protect their sexual health
- Precautions undermined by buyers' actions:
 - demands for oral, vaginal and anal sex without a condom
 - 'stealthing'

Buyers' risky behaviours

guy asked me to...go on my knees on the bed and he was behind me. But I'm not stupid! So, I put my hand down there – and he was without condom...Crazy, because they don't know you, you know? How can they think of having sex [without a condom] – and not because we are escorts – any woman?... I think it's most of the men they don't like condoms and they just don't think about the risks.

- LUCIANA

Specific sexual health impacts of prostitution sex

- 79% experiencing one+ of the most common sexual health issues – vaginal discomfort, abnormal discharge, abnormal odour, candida, bacterial vaginosis and UTIs – in most cases on multiple occasions
- These most prevalent harms result from the *frequency* with which multiple, different, often previously unknown buyers have sexual access to their bodies
- Sex acts that are unwanted and undesired
- Over-washing and over-use of lube contributes to these health issues

Emotional health harms of prostitution sex

- Handling demands they find repellent or frightening

I hate that people like want a schoolgirl. When they call and they said, 'Ah, can I pretend I am your son?' Oh my god, I have kids! Like dress like a schoolgirl, things like that, you know? I don't know, maybe I don't call it paedophile, but if something goes against me I can't, you know.

- NATALIA

Emotional health harms of prostitution sex

- Having to emulate non-existent sexual desire for buyers

And the guys think, 'Ah, she have pleasure.' Of course not. Stupid, you know...The guys think, 'Ah, no, I come here for give to you pleasure'. And I think, 'Jesus, no, disgusting!'

- ELENA

Emotional health harms of prostitution sex

- Enduring physical and sexual contact that is unwanted and that they feel they can no longer bear

So, I offered 'full service' [penetrative sex], as they say, for a few years. But I was like really, really, let's say, sick in my head. That thing [the sex acts involved] like made me feel really sad...So, after four years offering full service, I decided to not offer full service anymore. I was ready to try massage because I couldn't handle anybody touching my body...it was horrible...I didn't want anybody touching my body because of money, even when they paid me. I didn't want that anymore...They [buyers] lie down there and I give them massage. I know at the end they have to turn around and I give them a hand job, whatever, you know – but anyway they don't touch me...they don't go to my privacy, my intimacy...I'm not exposing my intimacy anymore. - LUCIANA

Mental health impacts

Mental health and wellbeing issues (Experienced by 66% of whole sample)	No. of times presented	No. of women
Health worries	61	37
Anxious/upset/coping difficulties	56	33
Non-health worries	50	30
Stressed/under pressure	26	21
Nervous/fearful	24	13
Experiencing depression	10	8
Problematic drug use	7	4
Isolated/lacking social supports	6	5
Problematic alcohol use	6	3

Survivor voices

“But it [selling sex] kind of degrades you as well, and your self-confidence goes with it. Your worth, it just disappears... It was the toughest, the most dehumanising, the most embarrassing at the same time, and painful... The pains, the hurt, the trauma will always be there... I always say it’s an ongoing healing process.” **‘Amara’**



Survivor voices

“I’ve money but, like, I’m destroyed, like physically destroyed. I’m mentally destroyed. I couldn’t even sleep in my bed. I couldn’t even sleep. I couldn’t bring myself to sleep in the bed. Eventually it got to that point. Like, what was happening there was haunting me, you know, the association, what was going on. [I would] sleep on the couch...”

“I would say that part of being a healthy human being is being able to have a healthy sex life. And I feel robbed of that. I don’t know if I’m ever going to recover from that...”

“[You’re] selling your body and completely dissociating from your physical being while you’re being penetrated... I can’t even describe how dehumanising that makes me feel. And it took me a long time to understand that it had harmed me...really harmed me.” ‘Rose’

The issue of consent

Consent in the context of prostitution

- Sexual consent is something that is freely given and is ‘the voluntary agreement to engage in sexual activity in a relationship with equal power.’
- This prostitution ‘transaction’ is by its very nature sexually exploitative, and does not fulfil the requirements of being truly consensual because:
 - The buyer and the seller do not enjoy a relationship of equal power
 - Consent is not ‘freely-given’ by the seller – rather she has been coerced, or she has acquiesced to granting the buyer unwanted sexual access to her body in exchange for the money or other items of value she badly needs
 - Money has been used to manipulate/coerce the seller into acquiescing to this unwanted sexual contact.

Buyers' awareness of unwanted sex

‘...there was just a lack of connection between us. And zero eye contact which made me very uncomfortable, the whole experience was just very mechanical unfortunately...’ *Newlysingle4321; 23/06/20*

‘Tried her best to be friendly but seemed a bit hypersensitive. She didn’t like the way I touched her hair etc, it was kind of a buzzkiller.’
TheGreatDestroyer; 08/05/20

‘Sadly this was a disaster from start to finish...Definitely not as sexy as her pictures suggest. She only removed her tracksuit bottoms and made little or no effort with the appointment. There was no bright personality & she certainly didn’t pay me much genuine attention as her profile suggests. Whenever I tried anything on her it was met with nothing but complaints. Eventually I just gave up & left.’ *mrshankly; 03/07/20*

The issue of violence

Sexual violence

“They [the buyers] are the king, right? If they try to do something without a condom or something I really don’t like, I give the money back...Have one guy...He paid an hour. He stay forty minutes really raping me because there was blood on the condom. Tried hard with anal. But because he could not feel nothing, and he was done with me, he stay forty minutes and I give his money back and ask him to leave. And I prefer that way. So, when they leave, I text and I say, ‘Please don’t call me again,’ and I block the number.” **‘Natalia’**

Is this work?

'Safety tips' for 'student sex workers'

- Never wear anything around your neck
- Keep a rape alarm close by
- Put the TV on in another room
- Never drink unopened drinks/Don't drink their drinks
- Always use a peep hole if you have one
- Check for laptop screens or if there is a camera running
- Doggy/from behind is the most dangerous sex position
- Put a mirror in the room so you can watch them in the reflection
- Pay attention to all exit routes and quickest ways out
- Be prepared and not embarrassed to run out of a room naked
- Wear minimal clothes, take shoes you can put on quickly in case you have to run



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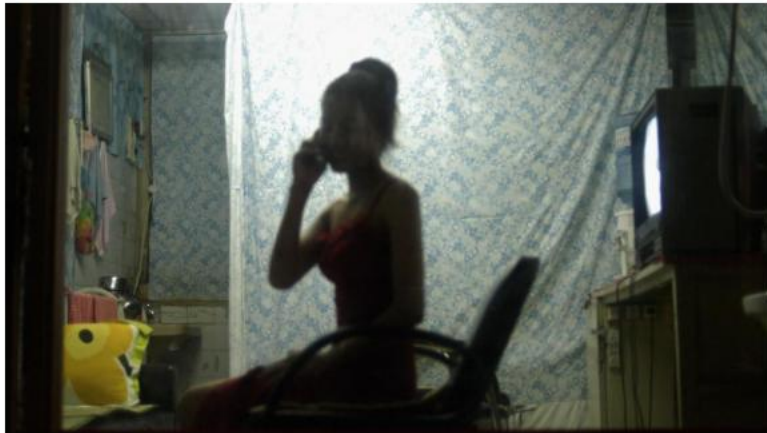


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HOMEPAGE / OPINION / COMMENT & ANALYSIS

Only crime gangs benefit from rebranding prostitution as 'sex work'

The imbalance in power between poor migrant women with no other opportunities and the well-off Irish men who buy sex from them could not be greater



Over 90% of those who work in prostitution in Ireland are migrant women — most are young, vulnerable and have ended up in the sex trade due to poverty, coercion or some combination of these push factors.

TUE, 29 APR, 2025 - 01:00

RUTH BRESLIN



Imagine a job which requires you to submit to multiple experiences of unwanted, undesired sex with numerous men every day? Where a beating or a rape at the hands of a violent "customer" are common occupational hazards? Where your customers regularly remove the condom you carefully positioned without your consent during a sex act, and you immediately fear an unwanted pregnancy or STI.

Imagine a job where you must insert a sponge into your vagina once a month, because your 'manager' insists you continue to sexually service clients even while you are menstruating.

Women in the Irish sex trade don't have to imagine such events, because these are the daily realities of their lives, realities which they share with us in our research. This experience cannot be classified as sex work. It is sexual exploitation.

A survivor's perspective

'I am pleased to hear the current Minister for Justice as well as his predecessor Minister McEntee totally reject the idea that commercial sexual exploitation is 'work'. It never has been, and it never will be. The Department of Justice's view is now in line with the Irish Congress of Trade Union's who describe prostitution as the very 'antithesis of decent work'. I could never understand, especially having lived experience, how a trade where rape and abuse thrive could ever be described as 'work'; in fact it's mainly used by those who wish to legalise one of the cruellest and most violent trades ever to exist.' **Mia de Faoite**

The impact of the legislation

Legislative approaches

- Nordic / Equality Model:
 - Decriminalises those who sell sex
 - Criminalises those who purchase sex
 - Criminalises those who organise and profit from the prostitution of another
- Legalisation / Decriminalisation:
 - Decriminalises those who sell sex
 - Decriminalises those who purchase sex
 - Decriminalises/legalises those who organise and profit from the prostitution of another – including pimps, brothel owners etc.

The implications of the sex work position

- Sanitises and normalises a highly exploitative trade
 - Everyone selling sex (whether independent/pimped/trafficked) = 'Sex worker'
 - Punter = 'Client'
 - Pimp = 'Manager' 'Businessman' 'Entrepreneur'
- Sexual harassment in the 'workplace' cannot be addressed because comments on clothing, sex life, sexual behavior and sexualised remarks are all part and parcel of prostitution
- Exiting supports are an afterthought rather than a top priority
- Minimises or denies the experiences of survivors – exclusionary
- The majority do not identify as 'sex workers' – "It's not who I am, it's just something I have to do."

The implications of the different approaches

- Full decriminalisation – failed to deliver on its promises, a ‘failed experiment’ – no decrease in violence, no increase in safety or wellbeing, no end to the most vulnerable being drawn into the trade
- The Equality model – plagued with implementation problems, but some successes in shifting the burden of criminal responsibility from the sellers to the buyers and profiteers; and in holding the growth of the sex trade at bay

The issue of scale

- Rates of prostitution per country – accounting for the differences in population size

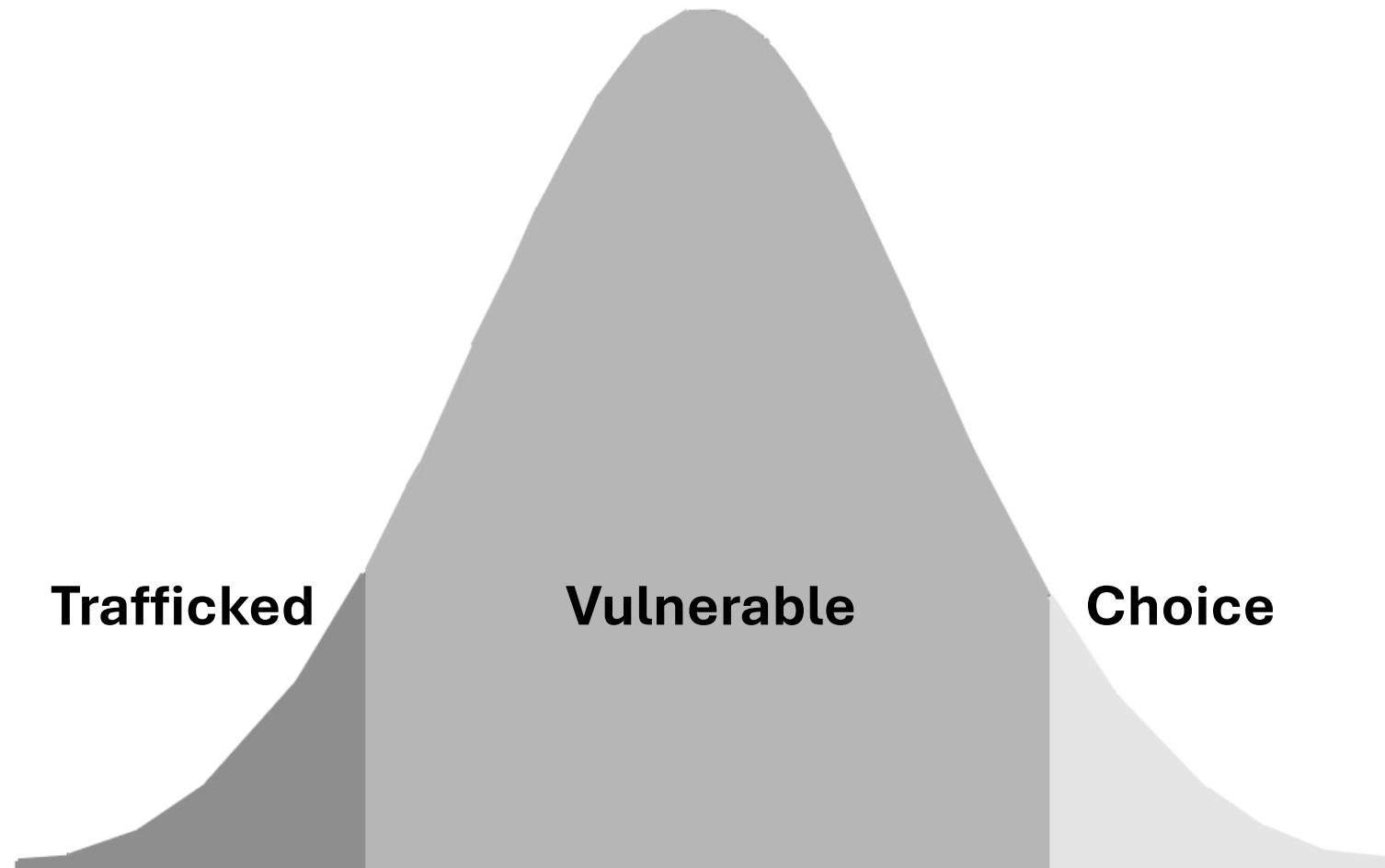
Equality Model

- Sweden 1 : 9
- Sweden 1 : 40
- Ireland 1 : 6

Legalisation / Full decriminalisation

The Netherlands
Germany
New Zealand

Profile of persons in the sex trade





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Research sources & findings [here](#)

Any questions?