

## **Submission in support of Mary Honeyball's Report on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality**

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We write as a global network of researchers in support of Mary Honeyball's motion for a resolution on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality (2013/2103(INI)).

We do this on the basis of deep and systematic expertise in researching the dynamics of prostitution and the sex industry, trafficking and violence against women. Our research draws on contemporary evidence, on historical and philosophical inquiry, and importantly on the testimony of survivors of the prostitution system. Many of us have worked directly with prostituted women. We have individual and collective links with a wide variety of organisations working for the abolition of prostitution as an institution of gender inequality and exploitation. We draw on both our practice-based evidence and our academic studies to strongly endorse the Honeyball report and its recommendation to adopt 'the Nordic model' as a pan-European approach to prostitution.

We believe it is important to signal that our position on prostitution is not grounded in a moralistic approach, or in any kind of hostility to women in the prostitution system. Nor is our position linked to considerations about maintaining 'public order'. Our concern is centrally with the human rights of women in protecting the dignity of all women equally, and with an end to all forms of the subordination and degradation of women.

The Honeyball Report calls attention to a number of key issues:

- the gender asymmetry of the sex industry, that is, men are overwhelmingly the majority of those who buy sexual acts, and women and girls those whose bodies are bought;
- countries where buying sexual acts has been criminalised have seen sex markets shrink, and trafficking reduced. This is a success for these countries as nation states, and the European Parliament adoption of the Nordic model offers the potential to replicate this progress across Europe;
- attitudes shift where the purchase of sexual acts is criminalised, with surveys in Sweden for example consistently showing that a large majority now think the purchase of sexual acts is unacceptable.<sup>1</sup> Law is a powerful tool in defining and changing what is, and is not, socially acceptable behaviour.

While we recognise that some women say they find selling sexual acts to be personally and economically empowering, these individual stories are not testament to the legitimacy of prostitution as a social institution. The prostitution system is a reminder of continuing inequalities between women and men: the gender pay gap; the sexualisation of female bodies in popular culture; histories of violence and abuse in both childhood and adulthood that underpin many women's entry into the sex industry. The persistence of these economic and social inequalities in every European country (and globally) is well documented in a wealth of academic research. Together these layers of disadvantage experienced by women mean that so-

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<sup>1</sup> See data and analysis in Max Waltman (2011) Sweden's Prohibition of Purchase of Sex: The Law's Reasons, Impact, and Potential *Women's Studies International Forum* 34: 459-460.

called 'free' choices are actually decisions made in conditions of already existing inequality and discrimination. Women's choices should not be measured simply by where they end up (in prostitution), but by the circumstances in which these choices must be made. Choices made in conditions of being unequal cannot be considered 'free'.

The Honeyball Report is a landmark because it shifts focus to the choices that men make to purchase sexual acts. Systematic research from Finland<sup>2</sup> and the UK<sup>3</sup> in particular reveals that men who pay for sexual acts do so because they believe that biological urges lead them to 'need' sex from a variety of different women. Some men explicitly report that they buy sexual acts because it is a context where they do not have to think about women as equal human beings with their own feelings, wishes and desires. Men's own experiences of prostitution, as collated on sites such as The Invisible Men,<sup>4</sup> provide a chilling picture of the reality of prostitution for women: of violence, desperation, subordination and despair.

This is why the Honeyball Report is clear that the idea and the reality that women's bodies can be bought – and sold – by men, to men, both creates and perpetuates relations between women and men as a hierarchy.

Prostitution is, as the Honeyball Report states, a form and a cause and a consequence of gender inequality. Achieving gender equality means taking steps towards a world where progress goes beyond improving the status of individual women in conditions of discrimination, but addresses those conditions. Criminalising the purchase of sexual acts, decriminalising those who sell, and providing specialist support to women to be able to leave prostitution, are measures that directly address gender inequalities.

The decision for your vote this week is whether or not to challenge the fiction that it is natural and inevitable for men to buy access to women's bodies for sexual release, and whether or not to challenge this as a deeply-rooted form of gender inequality.

The European Parliament has an historic opportunity to act as a global beacon on gender equality, following the pioneering example set by the Nordic countries. We urge you and your party members not to waste it, and to vote for the Honeyball motion.

**24<sup>th</sup> February 2014**

[Please note: The institutional affiliations of the signatories are provided for identification purposes only.]

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<sup>2</sup> Marttila, A.-M. (2008) Desiring the 'Other': Prostitution Clients on a Transnational Red-Light District in the Border Area of Finland, Estonia and Russia *Gender, Technology and Development* 12: 31-51.

<sup>3</sup> See for example: Coy, M, Horvath, M.A.H., Kelly, L. (2007) *'It's just like going to the supermarket': Men buying sex in East London*, London: Child and Woman Abuse Studies Unit, available at [www.cwasu.org](http://www.cwasu.org); Farley, M., Macleod, J., Anderson, L., & Golding, J.M. (2011) Attitudes and Social Characteristics of Men Who Buy Sex in Scotland, *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice, and Policy* 3(4): 369-383.

<sup>4</sup> <http://the-invisible-men.tumblr.com/>.

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