

# Cross-Party Group on Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Tuesday 19th November 2024 from 18.30-20.00

This was an online meeting.

## Minutes

## Present

## MSPs

Rhoda Grant MSP Scottish Labour  
John Mason MSP Independent

Co-convenor  
CPG MSP Member

## Non-MSPs

Reem Alsalem	Speaker
Jacci Stoye	Secretary
Alison Raybould	Salvation Army
Cora McConville	Salvation Army
Chris Hall	Not for Sale Scotland
Ann Hall	Not for Sale Scotland
Sasha Rakoff	Not Buying It
Susan Smith	For Women Scotland
Marion Calder	For Women Scotland
Kirsti Hay	Community Safety Glasgow
Linda Thomson	Women Support Project
Laura Nacyte	Women Support Project
Susan McKellar	Scottish Women's Convention
Teresa Little	Individual
Lynn Benevento	PA to Ruth Maguire
Janice Wilson	Soroptimist (Scotland North)
Sally Jackson	FiLiA
Ali Morris	FiLiA
Karen Murdarasi	Restore Glasgow
Agnes Martony	individual
Janet Warren	Individual
Agnes Martony	Individual
Susana McIntyre	Individual
Emily McLean	Individual (Scot gov staff)
Leah Martin	Individual
Lyn Jardine	Individual
Steve Rawbone	Individual

## Agenda item 1

### Welcome and apologies for absence

Rhoda gave apologies from her co-convenor Ruth Maguire, following Ruth's public announcement, that, very sadly, she is facing the return of her cancer and is currently off sick. We wish her the very best going through her treatment and a speedy recovery. We look forward, very much, to welcoming her back with us as co-convenor.

Jeremy Balfour MSP Scottish Conservative  
Ash Regan MSP Alba

Michael Veitch	CARE
Aileen Fleming	SOTHIS
Sophie Reymbaut	Individual
Agnes Tolmie	Scottish Women's Convention

## Agenda item 2

**Presentation by Ms Reem Alsalem, United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women and Girls to speak to us this evening. Reem Alsalem is an independent consultant on gender issues, the rights of refugees and migrants, transitional justice and humanitarian response. She has consulted extensively for United Nations departments, agencies and programmes such as UN-Women, OHCHR, UNICEF and IOM, as well as for non-governmental organizations, think tanks and academia.**

Reem undertook a thematic report for the United Council to the UN Nations on Sexual Exploitation in the Context of Prostitution, which is linked to violence to women and girls. She shared her findings and recommendations.

Prostitution is a system with three main players; the prostituted woman, who is the victim, the buyer (predominantly male) who has most agency, and the pimp/trafficker, who makes a profit from the transaction. Others also profit, such as the tourist industry, the digital players and the state (in some countries women are taxed). Reem also includes pornography, which she called 'filmed prostitution'. Pornography has an immensely harmful impact on society as well as individuals. She explained that she uses the word prostitution because it is an agreed definition, as opposed to sex work, which is not agreed by all states, it is not human rights based, and it gives a wrong impression of what's at stake. Prostitution is a system, which relies on abuse and exploitation, it's not a job that empowers, or that women consent to, and the term 'sex work' gaslights what happens, as survivors, and organisations who support them, will attest.

The system of prostitution is fuelled by patriarchal norms, which justify and normalise that one gender can buy the other. The global system of commodification fuels the idea that women's bodies can be sold for their reproductive functions too. These difficult conditions for women and girls are further exacerbated by war, displacement and poverty, making women and girls even more marginalised. In Europe, prostituted women come from Nigeria, Ukraine or Eastern Europe, where these issues are predominant. In Hungary, and elsewhere, many women are from the Roma minority, which suffers a lot of discrimination. Disturbingly, it is clear, that prostitution thrives on sexualising and racializing poverty. For example,

fetishization of prostitution, which stratifies women according to shades of colour, ties into the whole notion of customising what you buy.

For her report, Reem received over 300 pieces of input from all kinds of actors, covering more than 70 countries, but the most difficult thing was speaking to survivors about the most appalling, unspeakable, levels of violence that they suffered, violating every human right, often resulting frequently in addiction issues. Also, it was evident from the data regarding pornography, just how harmful the normalisation of buying sexual acts is. Firstly, the buyer violates the rights of another human being, which leads to the commodification of women. The buyers are not interested why the woman is there, or whether she is trafficked or not, and they do nothing about it even when they do know. There is evidence that consuming pornography gives a sense of entitlement to more sexual acts, this leads to more buying of, and to more aggression in, sexual acts. The quest for greater variety leads to buying more different women and undertaking more perverse acts. There is often a desire to act out in prostitution what you have seen in pornography. Indeed, the data of young women experiencing strangulation in sex from their partners, is thought to be because of the trend in pornography. Boys are getting most of their knowledge from pornography, so, what they see, they think is normal to do and to ask for. Girls experience a lot of distress due to the constant pornification, and the message that what you are worth as a female is based upon whether you are sexually desired. Reem said it's a no brainer that whilst this is normalised, women will never achieve gender equality.

In her report, Reem also looked at the four legal and policy models of prostitution in her report. She wanted to focus on two. Firstly, there is the model that considers legalising all aspects of prostitution. The woman isn't criminalised, but nor is the buyer or pimp, which makes traffickers very difficult to prosecute. There may have been good intentions for doing this, being safer, having social security, less violence, but in the states which chose this route, such as Germany, none of these objectives have been achieved. In fact, the very opposite has occurred. Whilst every woman *should* have an employment contract, very few do. In Germany the number of women in prostitution is between 250,000 and 400,000. If this is work, the women should be registered. However, there are between 28,000-180,000 women registered, but only 50 have employment contracts. Also, if it's work like any other, why are most women in Germany, who are in prostitution, migrant women? In this model it becomes impossible to report violence, because such acts are considered 'work incidents'. So, in Germany, if a buyer breaks the arm of a woman he is using, it is treated the same way in law as a painter falling from a ladder and breaking his arm. This policy has led to an increase in the numbers of women in prostitution and to related criminal activities, such as trafficking in people, drugs and money laundering.

The other model that Reem wanted to consider was the Nordic or Equality Model with the five components, firstly, to decriminalise women, because they are victims. Secondly, to criminalise the purchase of sex acts. This second point is the gamechanger; we must make it harder for the buyer and make him aware of what he risks. Thirdly, to criminalise all forms of pimping. The fourth is to have education/information campaigns for the general population and at major tourist events. The fifth component is to provide comprehensive exit strategies, physical, mental and psychological stabilisation, housing, trauma informed specialist help, and eventually retraining. This is a long-term activity and will need resources. Migrant women would not be deported and exposed to further risk.

Finally, we should not look at prostitution only through the lens of trafficking because it emphasises the false dichotomy between the two notions of forced prostitution and consenting prostitution.

In concluding, Reem recommends the Nordic Model, she believes pornography should be outlawed, that it is not possible to remove the violence, and that age verification should be implemented immediately and the access raised to 21. States should not let pornography businesses implement rules voluntarily, but rather states should enforce much stricter rules and regulations on them. All states need to provide exit strategies and decriminalise women, whether they have the Nordic Model or not. Survivors and pro-Nordic model organisations must be invited to the table, not just those advocating sex work and there needs to be a comprehensive education programme.

### Agenda item 3

There was an opportunity for questions and discussion.

**LT:** I'm concerned that the Scottish Government named prostitution as a form of violence in 2008, and yet in 2024, we still haven't adopted a model that would support that approach.

**JM:** What happens to your report?

**Reem:** There is no obligation on states to implement the reports, but they have an authoritative weight to them. My report was well received by many states.

**EM:** Informed members that the Minister has started a collaboration working with Police Scotland with a 'challenge demand approach'. Police Scotland have also been given resources for specialist software to aid their work online.

**LT:** Reem what are your thoughts about the police attitude to working alongside sexual exploitation websites 'to understand them better' which are profiting from CSE?

**Reem:** It rubber stamps the business model and doesn't lead to any results.

**RG:** We've looked more at prostitution than pornography in this group. What would you recommend regarding pornography?

**Reem:** States are concerned with the effect it is having on young people and there are calls for older age verification.

**LT:** Have you any advice for the councillors who say 'you didn't listen to sex workers' and therefore take no notice of what front-line services say.

**Reem:** Yes, they are women with lived experience, but survivors are also women with lived experience, and they need to be heard too -broaden the pool of people who need to be consulted. States are also pushing this; in that by saying that prostitution is work, you are saying that the most vulnerable women can and should fend for themselves.

**KH:** We are seeing the links with pornography and other forms of violence against women, such as the prevalence with non-fatal strangulation.

**Reem:** Another problem regarding the concept of prostitution as work is how the media dehumanises and trivialises violence and murder in prostitution. In New Zealand there is a pamphlet for women in prostitution, which outlines strategies which teach them how to get out of a room alive.

**JS:** The states also have a responsibility to implement the laws they have, and to protect those who are vulnerable. If those laws are not working with the new technology, they need to make them fit for purpose.

**AM:** How would you recommend Scotland should act to stop young women becoming victims of CSE?

**Reem:** Preventing access to pornography with enforcement of age verification. It takes time to get to the Nordic Model. You have actors who are working on all the components of the Nordic Model that we have discussed; but we need to bring them to the table. We haven't mentioned universities, but we need to find out how prostitution is promoted there and how students are enticed into this. We also need to discuss the impact on the buyers and how it can harm their health.

**LT:** How important is it that the VAWG sector embeds this into their own work?

**Reem:** Yes, it's very important. I will be publishing my report in June next year on my visit to the UK. My recommendations include more resources, and I had included a standalone Minister for VAWG, because that's what I think the UK needs. It probably won't get one, but a country that is rich and can divert resources, such as arms, should be able to do so to deal with this properly.

**RG:** Rhoda thanked Reem for her amazing work and for coming to talk to us at such length and so comprehensively.

## **Agenda item 4**

### **Parliamentary and CPG Updates from the MSPs present**

Rhoda gave us an update on Ash's Unbuyable bill. She said that 100 consultation responses had been received and three quarters of them were supportive. The responses and summary would be published soon, and that cross-party support had been achieved. Things were progressing well, and she would be in touch again soon with further updates.

## **Agenda item 5**

### **AOB**

**Cora McConville:** Edinburgh Council have been advised by lawyers that they are committing a criminal offence by not complying with safety regulations in their HMOs providing accommodation for homeless people. They are saying they will have to stop paying for about 700 rooms, which may make about 1000 people homeless. These risks will increase the risk of sexual exploitation for the vulnerable women concerned. Could we as a group respond to this?

Rhoda said it was a short time scale and asked Jacci if she could write a statement on behalf of the CPG for CSE. Jacci said yes, if everyone in the meeting was happy for her to do so. It was agreed that she would send it to Edinburgh Council and the Minister for Housing, and a copy would go to the Herald and the Scotsman.

### **Date of next meeting**

Rhoda asked members to let us know if there were any issues that they wanted to consider. Linda suggested having a joint meeting with the MVAWG CPG as they would be discussing pornography and its harms at their next meeting. This was considered an excellent idea and Jacci will pursue this with Nicola from the MVAWG CPG and report back to the group with their response and, hopefully, a date.