

Written evidence submitted by Dr Niina Vuolajärvi, Assistant Professor at the London School of Economics (CPB102)

Please find below my submission of written evidence pertaining to the Crime and Policing Bill for consideration by the Public Bill Committee.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Author: Dr. Niina Vuolajärvi, Assistant Professor, London School of Economics and Political Science

Expertise: Specialist on commercial sex and the Nordic Model; research based on over 210 interviews conducted across Sweden, Norway, and Finland.

Position on Proposed Amendments

- Opposes:
 - New Clause 1 (Commercial sexual exploitation by a third party)
 - New Clause 2 (Commercial sexual exploitation / sex buyer criminalisation)
- Supports:
 - New Clause 3 (Victims of sexual exploitation), but only if not passed alongside NC1 and NC2, which would negate its positive effects.

Key Findings from Research

New Clause 1: Criminalising Third-Party Involvement

- Overly broad definition criminalises anyone assisting a sex worker—even family, friends, or service providers—creating "victimless crimes."
- Enforcement practices in the Nordic countries have led to:
 - Evictions and housing insecurity
 - Criminalisation of sex workers' partners and support networks
 - Disruption of safety practices like working together
 - Increased risk of blackmail and informal exploitation
- Outcome: Criminalisation of third-party assistance harms sex workers, increases vulnerability, and pushes them into unsafe or exploitative situations.

New Clause 2: Criminalising the Purchase of Sex

- Findings from Sweden and Norway:
 - Law endangers sex workers by undermining safety strategies (e.g. client screening, choice of location)
 - Police harassment and surveillance common; trust in law enforcement diminished
 - Stigma worsened; public support for criminalising selling of sex has increased significantly
 - Minimal or no access to promised social services; no increased funding for support systems
 - No robust evidence that the law reduces trafficking or the prevalence of commercial sex
- **Consequences:**
 - More violence and unsafe conditions
 - Isolation from services and officials
 - Undermining of sex workers' autonomy and rights
 - Harm is disproportionately severe for migrants and vulnerable populations

Evidence from Other Countries

- Ireland and France: Post-legislation impacts include:
 - Increase in violence and marginalisation
 - Decreased safety and negotiation power
 - Loss of income and worsening health outcomes
 - Deterioration in relations with law enforcement and public services

Recommendations

1. Remove all criminal penalties related to consensual adult commercial sex, including:
 - Selling and buying sex (**New Clause 3 would support this recommendation**)
 - Non-exploitative third-party involvement

2. Shift focus from punitive measures to harm reduction, health, and social support
3. Design policy around sex workers' lived realities and safety needs

Conclusion

The so-called Nordic Model has not achieved its goals of protecting people in the sex trade or reducing trafficking. Instead, it has resulted in harmful unintended consequences, including:

- Increased vulnerability to violence and exploitation
- Stigmatization and social exclusion
- Deterioration in access to housing, health care, and legal protection

MAIN SUBMISSION WITH DETAILED RESEARCH EVIDENCE

Why am I providing evidence?

I am Dr. Niina Vuolajärvi, an Assistant Professor at the London School of Economics and Political Science specialized on commercial sex in the Nordic region and the so-called “Nordic Model” that criminalizes the sex buyers and ostensibly leaves sex sellers out of criminalisation.

Based on my extensive research undertaken over a three-year period in Sweden, Norway, Finland which included 210 formal interviews, I wanted to submit my statement regarding Proposed Amendments to the UK Police & Crime Bill and provide you with the policy brief based on my research “[Criminalising the Sex Buyer: Experiences from the Nordic Region](#)” published by the LSE Centre for Women, Peace and Security to guide an informed evidence-based discussion on the Bill.

Position on Proposed Amendments

I address three proposed amendments to the Crime and Policing Bill:

Based on my research I strongly oppose New Clause 1 (commercial sexual exploitation by a third party) and New Clause 2 (commercial sexual exploitation)

Based on my research I support the New Clause 3 (victims of sexual exploitation). However, if it is passed within a broader set of amendments (NC1 and 2) that further the criminalisation of commercial sex its benefits are lost.

Research evidence

New Clause 1: commercial sexual exploitation by a third party

Based on my research I oppose New Clause 1 because a broad definition of third party exploitation as “assisting and facilitating” another person in sexual activity with another person “regardless of whether they secure personal financial gain, or personally benefits in many way” produces a victimless crime where any type of assistance of a sex worker will be criminalized even if it would be beneficial for the person selling sexual services and there would be no gain for the person providing assistance. This is against the interest and protection of people who sell sex.

The broad definition means that anyone associated with sale of sex will be criminalized, including sex workers’ partners, family and friends, as well as landlords, hotel owners, accountants etc.

My research finds that in the Nordic region where similar third party regulation is at place, the police and prosecution use it to:

- a. **Prosecute partners of sex workers** for looking after their common children while their partner is working, sharing housing with a sex worker, or providing their partner a ride to meet a client.

- i. For example, the police has prosecuted a husband of a Swedish sex worker as a “pimp” because he was looking after the children when his wife was providing sexual services and because she contributed to the common household bills.

- b. **Push sex workers from hotels and apartments** by informing hotels and landlords that if they do not get rid of the sex worker that they can be accused of pimping. As one Swedish police explained their practice:

“If you rent out to a prostitute you can be accused of procuring. What we do is that we leave a note to the landlord saying what kind of activity takes place in their apartment and what had happened [why the police have been there]. We also mention in the note that if we come up one more time, if it happens again, they will be interrogated about procuring. In this case, the landlords will kick out the women”

- c. The broad definition of third party assistance **criminalises all working together and support that sex workers provide for each other** such as sharing a flat for safety, or providing safety or other guidance. A Swedish police officer explained:

“It is difficult in relation to the procuring law, because if the lease is on one person’s name, she is basically pimping the other. In general, it is hard for the police to know who is who, and where does the money go. [...] [U]nder the procuring law the other can be accused of pimping just by having the contract in their name.”

- d. Sex workers also reported that people can use **sex workers' fear of eviction as a tool for blackmail**. A Latin American escort explained the situation in Sweden:

“The person responsible for the building contacted me, told me, ‘You’re living in my building.’ He said to me that I had to deliver a service to him for free otherwise he was going to report me.”

- e. It makes **illegal for sex workers to hire a person to take care of their telephone calls, write or manage their advertisements, or advertise on online forums that are based in the countries**. Providing accounting services for a sex work business can be interpreted as assisting in sex sales and therefore, pimping.

In summary, the introduction of broad definition of third party assistance has led to the police to use third-party laws to evict sex workers and people in the sex trade from their apartments, it exposes sex workers to blackmailing, criminalizes their partners and **prevents people in the sex trade to contact officials when they are victims of crime or exploitation in fear of losing their housing**. As Lina, a Latin American trans woman, summarizes how the broad definition of third party assistance affects sellers of sex like her:

“This is a contradictory law. They kind of let you work but they control you – in the end, they force you not to work. [...] They say you can work, but you cannot work in an apartment because then the owner is a criminal, you cannot work in a hotel because then the hotel is criminal. [...] Here, you cannot call the police if you are in trouble, if somebody is violent, robbing you or something. [...]”

In Sweden and Norway, police actions has produced a dire housing situation for sex workers, but especially migrants, with increased vulnerability and exposure to homelessness. Lack of access to formal housing has meant that many are forced to turn to more informal and exploitative arrangements where those who rent the premises know that the apartment is used to sell sex and hence also ask more money for it. **In other words, the active enforcement of the pimping law and shutting down formal rental opportunities can actually increase pimping and push people into, rather than steer them away from, exploitative arrangements.**

New Clause 2 (commercial sexual exploitation)

The proposed amendment would introduce an offence for paying for sex, often known as the Nordic or the Swedish Model.

Based on my extensive research on the policy in Sweden, Norway and Finland, I strongly oppose this amendment because sex buyer criminalization impacts negatively on sex workers and people on the sex trade and puts them in may ways in harm’s way. The impacts are multiplied when those who sell sex are migrants or otherwise marginalized/in vulnerable position.

Contrary to the Nordic model's discourse of prostitution as violence, my study finds that only a small minority of those 129 sex workers and people in the sex trade interviewed – 6 per cent – considered themselves to have been trafficked or forced by someone else to sell sex. Intention to earn money was cited as the single biggest motivator for those engaging in the sex trade and/or migrating for commercial sex irrespective of their interpretation or feelings of the sex trade. This is in line with other international research that shows that 6-16% of people in the sex trade are trafficked of forced into it ([Mai](#)

[2009](#); Wagenaar, Altink & Amesberger [2013](#); Sahni & Shankar [2013](#)). Therefore calling buying of sex as sexual exploitation is misleading.

My research concludes that sex buyer criminalization:

1. **Hampers sex workers' safety practices and exposes sex workers and people in the sex trade to violence.** Sex buyer criminalisation makes client screening difficult. On the streets, clients hurry negotiations, they want to move the transaction further away from the street, or in general clients avoid public locations such as hotels which are safer for sex workers than going to premises selected by the client. A migrant sex worker in Sweden described the situation:

*"Because clients want to go further and further from the streets and do it in their houses, it takes me six hours to make here on the streets what I could do in other places [countries] in one hour. **It flips the power position; I have to focus on making them feel safe.**"*

A Swedish sex worker who has worked in various national contexts stated:

*"Swedish people don't want to screen. **They're afraid of the police which makes the whole thing – it doesn't feel very safe. You need to go to people's homes.**"*

2. In Sweden and Norway, people in the sex trade have reported **being targets of police harassment, aggressive policing, and a general breakdown in relations with the police** as a consequence of the introduction on ban on buying sex. Interviewees reported invasive surveillance and questioning of people in the sex trade, and interference with and exposure to hotels and booking companies.

Forty-year-old Freija, who had started to sell sex at the age of 18 for survival and whose experiences in the sex trade had been traumatic, talked about her disappointment with the law:

*"Politicians promised the moon and the stars when they introduced the Sex Purchase Act. [...] The law was supposed to protect women and target clients and pimps. But the reality is not like that. **Many experience that the police hunt them on the street. Again, it is the women who become the vulnerable party.**"*

A sex worker in Sweden explained how upon being visited and questioned twice by police, she stated that she was selling sex voluntarily, and that it was her job. **The police continually made false appointments to her with different phone numbers to disturb her business.** When she asked them to stop, the police called around hotels in the area so that it was impossible for her to get a room. Later when she tried to book a private trip abroad, her hotel booking account was no longer working normally. The booking site informed her that this was due to police contact.

3. It has **worsened the relations between officials and sex workers and people in the sex trade.** Consequently, they are **afraid to be in touch with official when victims of crime or exploitation.**
4. It **increases the stigma and marginalization sex workers and people in the sex trade** experience in society.

Stigma is one of the main catalysts of violence and exclusion for sex workers and people in the sex trade. In 1996, prior adaptation of the Sex Purchase Act, 32 per cent of Swedes supported criminalising the act of buying, in 2012 this percentage was 65 per cent. Similar rise in negative attitudes can be seen in relation to the sale of sex. **In 1996, 30 per cent of Swedes believed that selling sexual services should be criminalized, whereas in 2012 52 per cent, believed it should be prohibited by law.** Additionally, 82 per cent believe that sex work is harmful to the people who engage in it.ⁱ

Interviewees in Sweden and Norway stated that the polarisation of the debate around commercial sex has resulted in **social and political isolation.** Interviews demonstrate how stigmatising views of commercial sex as violence prevalent in Sweden translate into experiences of victimisation and overall discrimination in interactions with officials, service providers and the media.

5. **Social services** were supposed to be the backbone of the Nordic model. However, these services **have not realized themselves**, for example Sweden has not directed any new funding to social services, instead funding has gone to the police and awareness raising. Interviewees pointed to a lack of truly comprehensive or effective support that would help with finding alternative employment to commercial sex.
6. The findings show that **the vast majority of the interviewees—96 per cent—oppose the sex buyer law** and support removing criminal penalties related to the sex trade so that sex sale can be organised without punity.

7. There is **no evidence for the Nordic model reducing the levels of commercial sex or sex trafficking**. The problem is that there is no systematic research before and after the introduction of sex buyer law. What we know based on [Holmström & Skilbrei 2017](#):
- **Levels of people in sexual commerce:** Studies show that street prostitution is down 50 %, but Internet escort ads rising (over 2000 % between 2006 and 2014 from 304 to 6,965 ads) → hard to say anything as Internet was not an arena when the law was passed.
 - **Levels of trafficking:** No data before the law on trafficking and the data from different countries is not comparable. Some studies claim that there is less trafficking in countries that implement harsher prostitution policies (both on buying and selling) but do not rely on comparable data ([Cho et al. 2013](#)). Also, police in Sweden says that it helps to prevent trafficking but it is hard to assess if one law could have that kind of effect.
 - **Levels of buying:** From 13% to 8% decrease before vs. after the law in Swedish surveys. However recent studies state that in Sweden 10-15 %, Finland 11-13%, Norway 13%, Denmark 13%, of men has bought sex, so there is no radical difference between Sweden and Norway that have adopted full sex buyer criminalization to other Nordic countries (Sverige Folkhälsomyndigheten [2019](#))

Evidence from other countries demonstrate similar consequences of Nordic model style law:

8. In Ireland, two years after the introduction of criminalizing the buying of sex, **self-reported crime towards people who sell sex has almost doubled** (Source: [Ugly Mugs 2019](#))
9. In France, the introduction of the criminalization of sex buying has led to an **increase in violence, deterioration** of living conditions, **loss** of income, harder to negotiate **condom use, deterioration** of relations with police, and low **awareness or suitability of the exit programs** (Source: [Medicins du Monde 2018](#))
10. In Ireland, the market reduction was temporary: Sex buyer law **reduced the size of the sex market**, however this decrease **was temporary and within 18-24 months the market had returned to pre-sex buyer law levels**. (Source: [Peter Backus & Thien Nguyen 2021](#))

New Clause 3 (Victims of sexual exploitation)

I support the New Clause 3 that would repeal the offence of “Loitering or soliciting for purposes of prostitution” and relevant related parts of the Street Offences Act 1959. But only if not passed alongside NC1 and NC2, which would negate its positive effects as it would create a direct and indirect criminalisation of sex workers and people in the sex trade and harm their safety.

Based on my research in Finland where selling sex in public place is criminalized, the law hampers sex workers’ safety practices, leads to police harassment and can lead to for example police using condoms as evidence.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Based on my study, I recommend removing criminal penalties related to consensual adult commercial sex to protect the safety, integrity and rights of people in the sex trade. This would include selling, buying and non-exploitative third party assistance.

CONCLUSION

The Nordic style regulation of criminalization of sex buying is harmful and in the Nordic region it has had negative consequences for sex workers and people in the sex trade. The main goal of the Nordic model style regulation has become the abolition of commercial sex achieved through punitive policing of sex workers and people in the sex trade. People who sell sex and their needs are not centred in policymaking and service provision leading to increased vulnerability and exploitation.

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ⁱ Jari Kuosmanen, “Attitudes and Perceptions about Legislation Prohibiting the Purchase of Sexual Services in Sweden,” *European Journal of Social Work* 14, no. 2 (June 2011): 247–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691451003744341>; Carl Göran Svedin et al., *Prostitution i Sverige. kartläggning och utvärdering av prostitutionsgruppernas insatser samt erfarenheter och attityder i befolkningen* (Linköping: Linköping University Electronic Press, 2012), <http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:liu:diva-75383> Fulltext från Linköping University Electronic Press.