



Submission to the Citizen's Assembly on Prostitution and the Trafficking of Women, to inform the Assembly's discussion on gender equality

Dear members of the Citizens' Assembly,

[Ruhama](#) and the [Immigrant Council of Ireland](#) welcome the opportunity to make this submission to the Citizens' Assembly in relation to the issue of violence against women within the wider problem of gender equality in Ireland.

Prostitution and sex trafficking is an issue of gender equality, because it harms an extremely high proportion of women (more than 90%) on the one hand, and because of the impoverished background and life-long consequences they suffer on the other. The high investment needed for recovery and reintegration after prostitution is a crucial issue for society.

Just as important for gender equality is the fact that those who purchase sex (almost 100% men) take advantage of the vulnerability (poverty, addiction, economic pressures) of women, which hinders equality between women and men in general, in both practical and perceptual terms.

The vulnerability of women in itself does not cause prostitution. The societal culture that allows men with money in their pocket to purchase women (and sometimes men) for sex is the main cause of prostitution. Therefore, the societal culture that makes this permissible and generates gender inequality needs to be challenged.

Both Ruhama and the Immigrant Council of Ireland firmly place prostitution and sex trafficking on the spectrum of gender-based violence, making it an issue that requires a gender-specific legislative and policy response. It is overwhelmingly women and girls from marginalised, impoverished and migrant backgrounds that are in the sex trade in Ireland. They experience enduring harm and violence that has an impact upon their sexual, physical and emotional health and wellbeing.

Our submission focuses on the implementation of laws targeting exploiters, the need to address barriers and challenges faced by women affected by prostitution and sex trafficking, and the gaps in education and awareness-raising on the issue. We include three overarching recommendations to ensure that Ireland continues to work towards reducing the exploitation of prostitution and trafficking for the purposes of sexual exploitation. These recommendations are as follows:

- 1. Increase the provision of holistic supports, including statutory services, to women affected by prostitution and sex trafficking.**

The factors which render women vulnerable to prostitution must be addressed through the provision of holistic supports and services to ensure they do not end up entrenched in the sex trade without viable alternatives. There is a need for increased provision of statutory supports to those who have experienced prostitution and sex trafficking, including housing, holistic health services, migration supports, legal services, and further education and training opportunities.



2. Effectively implement legislation to both prevent and respond to sexual exploitation.

The majority of prostitution in Ireland is controlled by organised crime, and is fuelled by demand from the men who pay for sex. Legislation that deters organised profiteers of prostitution, human traffickers and sex-buyers must be effectively implemented to ensure it results in a reduction in commercial sexual exploitation.

3. Carry out awareness-raising, education and research on the sex trade.

In order to shift attitudes to commercial sexual exploitation, reduce its prevalence, and move towards a societal understanding of it as a form of violence against women, the government must continue to resource awareness-raising and education initiatives, including measures to deter demand.

The three core areas to address are outlined in detail on the subsequent pages within this submission, and all of this is contextualised within the current situation regarding commercial sexual exploitation in Ireland.

We appreciate the work that is being done by the members of the Citizens' Assembly to address the core issues standing in the way of the achievement of gender equality in Ireland, and would like to take this opportunity to thank the members for their consideration of our joint submission.

Should you have any questions or require any clarification on the contents of this submission, please do not hesitate to get in touch with the representatives of Ruhama or the Immigrant Council of Ireland named below.

Yours sincerely,

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About Ruhama

As Ireland's only dedicated frontline NGO providing support to women affected by prostitution and sex-trafficking for three decades, we believe Ruhama is well-positioned to make a submission to the Citizens' Assembly, and is grateful for the opportunity to do the same.

Since our foundation in 1989, we have supported thousands of women from over 60 nationalities. At the core of our work is the provision of direct, frontline services to women who require our support. At the same time, we work at a national and international level to influence the development and implementation of broader policies and legislation which tackle sexual exploitation, and ultimately enhance the lives of women affected by the global sex trade. At the national level, Ruhama was a core member of the Turn Off the Red Light campaign, is a member of NWCI, and is represented on the National Observatory on Violence against Women, the Monitoring Committee of the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence, the Victims' Rights Alliance and the South Inner City Drugs and Alcohol Task Force. At the international level, Ruhama is a member of the Coalition for the Abolition of Prostitution ([CAP International](#)) and the [Brussels' Call](#) campaign of the European Women's Lobby. We are also represented at the EU Civil Society platform against Trafficking in Human Beings.

We currently provide support to over 300 women per year¹, including women involved in both on-street prostitution and indoor prostitution.

About the Immigrant Council of Ireland

The Immigrant Council of Ireland is a charitable non-governmental organisation and an Independent Law Centre regulated by The Law Society of Ireland. The Immigrant Council of Ireland provides information, legal advice and representation to migrants and their families, while we prioritise vulnerable groups, in particular, migrant women experiencing gender-based violence and unaccompanied children. The organisation provides legal services and leads integration and policy campaigns benefitting migrant women trafficked for the purposes of sexual exploitation (or any other type of exploitation that also involves sexual violence). The Immigrant Council of Ireland are gender-specific in their work and have accumulated extensive expertise in direct legal representation of trafficked women, of policy interpretation and strategic litigation in this area. The Immigrant Council of Ireland is also a preferred media commentator and a participant in various consultations, organised by the Irish Government and other national and international formats.

Context: Prostitution and sex trafficking in Ireland

There are an estimated 1,000 women in prostitution in Ireland and they are in every city, town and village across the country. Up to 97% of those in prostitution are migrant women, and a significant number have been trafficked to or within Ireland.² Both national and international research, and the

¹ <https://www.ruhama.ie/wp-content/uploads/Ruhama-Annual-Report-2018.pdf>

² <http://www.dublinpact.ie/dignity/traffickingreport.pdf>

frontline work of Ruhama and the Immigrant Council alike, have shown that women experience violence in prostitution at a high rate – and this violence is at the hands of pimps, traffickers and sex buyers alike. The harms of prostitution encompass the physical, sexual and psychological. This has been well-documented and indicates an urgent obligation to respond to the needs of women, while holding their exploiters accountable under the law.

The push factors that drive women into the sex trade include poverty, precarious immigration status, homelessness and insecure housing, violence and third-party exploitation, and a lack of formal education qualifications. The bulk of the Irish sex trade is controlled by organised crime that includes national and transnational gangs. Modern technology has facilitated an increase in the indoor sex trade across Ireland and has allowed pimps and traffickers to go undetected and operate with impunity. Women are frequently toured around the country to ensure organisers avoid detection and to feed the demand from men who want to purchase sex for ‘new’ women.

Following years of campaigning by organisations in the Turn Off the Red Light campaign, Ireland introduced progressive legislation within the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017 that decriminalised those selling sexual access and on sale within the sex trade, and criminalised the act of paying for sexual access. This law recognised the inherent violence, exploitation and vulnerabilities endured by women in prostitution as well as the role that men who pay for sex play in fuelling demand and causing enduring harm and trauma to women.

Based on all of this, we are calling on the Citizens’ Assembly to recommend that the government:

- 1. Increase the provision of holistic supports, including statutory services, to women affected by prostitution and sex trafficking.**

Women affected by prostitution and sex trafficking face myriad challenges, including barriers to exiting the sex trade.

Key areas of concern include:

- Poverty and a lack of viable alternatives
 - Immigration status
 - Homelessness and other precarious housing situations
 - Violence, coercion and exploitation
 - Physical, sexual and psychological health issues
 - A lack of formal educational qualifications and work experience
 - Addiction and substance misuse
 - Geographic, social and emotional isolation
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Increased resources must be provided to allow for an enhanced, holistic response to the needs of women affected by prostitution across the country.³ This includes the provision of specialised and safe, gender-specific accommodation, holistic health services, migration supports, legal services, and further education and training opportunities.

The factors that drive women into prostitution are the same factors that compound to entrench women in the commercial sex trade and prevent them from accessing the supports they need and exiting. Research has shown that up to 90% of women want to exit prostitution at some stage, but find there is a lack of viable alternatives to allow them to do so.⁴

Resources must be delivered through statutory and non-statutory agencies, and stakeholder collaboration is required to ensure the needs of this marginalised group are met.

2. Effectively implement legislation to both prevent and respond to sexual exploitation.

Legislation that deters organised profiteers of prostitution, human traffickers and sex-buyers must be effectively implemented to ensure it results in a reduction in sexual exploitation. Prostitution is predominantly controlled by organised crime gangs operating across the island of Ireland and laws targeting these gangs must be utilised and enforced in order to thwart these operations.

Since the Human Trafficking Act was amended in 2013, there have been no convictions of traffickers in Ireland. According to the 2019 US State Department's Trafficking in Persons report, Ireland has been downgraded to a Tier 2 country for failing to meet even the minimum standards in both preventing and responding to human trafficking.⁵ Without applying this legislation properly, traffickers will continue to exploit women in prostitution with impunity.

As recommended in international law, including EU Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims⁶, legislation to disrupt the illicit business of pimps and traffickers and reduce the demand for prostitution was enacted under Part IV of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017. There have been three convictions to date under the Act and momentum must be increased and maintained in order to ensure this law fulfils the spirit of gender equality that underpins it.

All relevant legislation must endeavour to protect those in the sex trade who do not profit from the prostitution of others. This can be achieved through ongoing training with An Garda Síochána across the country, and clear implementation guidance from the upper echelons of law enforcement.

³ [file:///C:/Users/policy/Downloads/HLWG_Interim-Report_Geoffrey-Shannon%20\(2\).pdf](file:///C:/Users/policy/Downloads/HLWG_Interim-Report_Geoffrey-Shannon%20(2).pdf)

⁴ https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Melissa_Farley2/publication/279716838_Prostitution_and_Trafficking_in_9_Countries_Update_on_Violence_and_Posttraumatic_Stress_Disorder/links/57ec203708aebb1961ffa028/Prostitution-and-Trafficking-in-9-Countries-Update-on-Violence-and-Posttraumatic-Stress-Disorder.pdf

⁵ <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019-Trafficking-in-Persons-Report.pdf>

⁶ <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32011L0036&from=en>



Women in the sex trade experience high rates of violence at the hands of organisers and men who pay for sex and must be encouraged to come forward to report without fear of any form of repercussion. Gardaí must ensure that a victim-sensitive, gender-sensitive approach across the entire force to dealing with those affected by prostitution to ensure women in the sex trade have access to justice and are linked in with relevant support services.

3. Carry out awareness-raising, education and research on the sex trade.

In order to shift attitudes to commercial sexual exploitation, reduce its prevalence, and move towards a societal understanding of it as a form of violence against women, the government must continue to resource awareness-raising initiatives which draw attention to the well-documented and extensive harms of prostitution and sex trafficking upon the individuals involved. A core element of this ought to be the explicit referencing of the act of paying for sex as a driver of violence against women and an act of gender-based violence in and of itself. This can be done through raising public awareness of the legislation and engaging men as agents of change in tackling the culture that allows for the proliferation of the sex trade.

The updated curriculum for Relationships and Sexuality Education should include age-appropriate content about the commercial sex trade. Children are exposed to pornography at an increasingly young age and must be empowered to become critical consumers of online content by educating them on the harm and misogyny of porn. Young women should be made aware of the risks posed by newly emerging forms of prostitution, including the increasingly glamorised 'sugar-dating.' Furthermore, teaching on consent should be based upon mutuality and respect in sexual relationships. Education at a young age is vital to ensure negative attitudes and behaviours are not normalised.

In order to continuously monitor Ireland's response to prostitution and sex trafficking and the efficacy of the approach, research should be carried out at regular intervals to ensure that policy is informed by up-to-date data from trusted sources.