

Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [Prostitution](#), HC 756

Tuesday 10 May 2016

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Written evidence from witnesses:

– [Dr Brooke Magnanti](#)

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Members present: Keith Vaz (Chair); James Berry; Mr David Burrowes; Nusrat Ghani; Mr Ranil Jayawardena; Tim Loughton; Stuart C. McDonald; Mr Chuka Umunna; Mr David Winnick

Questions 144–193

Witness[es]: **Paris Lees**, journalist, presenter and equality campaigner, and **Dr Brooke Magnanti**, research scientist, blogger and writer, gave evidence.

Q144 Chair: May I welcome our witnesses, Paris Lees and Dr Brooke Magnanti? Thank you very much for coming. This is part of the Select Committee’s inquiry into prostitution. It is the first time Parliament has looked at this issue and we are very grateful to both of you for coming to give evidence today.

May I start with you, Paris Lees? The Committee has looked at a number of models other than the model we have in this country. We have looked at Denmark and Sweden and we may look at other countries as well. Do you think that the law on prostitution at the moment in the United Kingdom is satisfactory, or do you think it ought to be changed?

Paris Lees: I think it ought to be changed. Have you looked at New Zealand?

Chair: No, we haven’t.

Paris Lees: Okay, well, I think you should look at New Zealand. I don’t think that criminalising sex work makes anybody safer. Criminalising the buying of sex work wouldn’t have made me safer. I chose to do sex work as a student in Brighton. If it had been illegal for the men who came to see me and paid for my time, that would not have stopped me doing it; it would have just made them more desperate, paranoid and edgy, and it would have made me more desperate and less able to turn away people who were perhaps drunk or hostile. So no. When I felt safest doing sex work, speaking from personal experience, is when I have been working with friends, which under the current laws would make me a criminal, because of brothel keeping. If we

want to look at safety of sex workers, then we need to decriminalise aspects of sex work.

Q145 Chair: Thank you. Dr Magnanti, do you agree with that? Do you think that the law is unsatisfactory? It has been around for a very long time. Do you think it needs to be changed? We will come on to what the changes should be, but at the moment do you think that change is needed?

Dr Magnanti: Absolutely. I do think that it needs to be changed. Obviously we have the 1956 Act, which outlawed brothel keeping and also criminalises any two women working together, whether or not somebody is managing or pimping for someone else, if they just happen to be sharing premises. Then of course there is the Street Offences Act 1959, so anybody who is soliciting on the street is also criminalised.

Obviously, in the position that I was in, I was not really doing either of those things, but people that I worked with were in a position where they would have been criminalised. I myself felt that I was in a fairly safe position, just because the exchange of sex for money is not in and of itself currently illegal; it is more the things surrounding it that are currently illegal. Overall, obviously I come from a reasonably privileged and safe background compared to some people who end up in very chaotic and desperate situations, but don't they deserve to feel as safe doing the work and to feel as able to go to the authorities if they feel threatened as I felt?

Q146 Chair: Both of you have been very open about the fact that you were sex workers at some stage in your lives. Do you think that this could be misunderstood by younger girls, in particular, although of course it could be girls or boys. Do you think that people might see this as something of a career? Did you see it as a career, Paris Lees? Or did you have to do it because you couldn't afford to pay your way at university?

Paris Lees: Well, what's wrong if younger people do see this as a career? If you don't think there is anything wrong with sex work, why would you worry about influencing whether other people choose to do it or not? Did I see it as a career? I saw it as something that enabled me to get on. Yes, I may have made different choices if I had had different choices, but the reality is that I would not have been able to put myself through university without sex work; I would not have got my degree or been able to establish myself in the media, or have been able to get a public profile for myself to talk about these issues and have a voice. I probably wouldn't be sitting here today had it not been for sex work. It has been a really good thing in my life and it has really helped me. All of the accolades and awards that I have won for who I am today are a direct consequence of my having done sex work.

Q147 Chair: And you have never felt under pressure or that someone was making you do this? You have never felt in any way degraded?

Paris Lees: No. I have never been raped. I was a sex worker. I have not been trafficked.

Q148 Chair: Dr Magnanti, do you see this as a career? Do you see yourself as perhaps a role model for others who might want to follow you?

Dr Magnanti: Perhaps as a role model for people who want to become child health scientists. My situation is as a non-EU migrant. In the period between when I submitted my PhD and when I had my viva, there was zero funding. Of course, being non-EU I had no recourse to public funds. I was in a situation where I could either go home and not attend my viva and therefore not obtain my PhD and not have the science career that I had been working for a decade to get to, or I could do sex work. There were also laws in place at the time that forbade non-EU students from working for more than 15 hours per week, and also forbade any employers from employing us where there was any qualified EU applicant. I was basically between a rock and a hard place.

Q149 Chair: So you had to do it?

Dr Magnanti: I saw it as a stopgap, really, in the way that a lot of students would choose to work behind a bar. If working behind a bar had been an option and if it had paid enough to live in London for the months while I was waiting for my viva, sure, that might have been a valid option for me, but it simply wasn't. I think that the root causes—things like migration policy and the social safety net—really need to be looked at very hard before you start piling new laws on top of that.

Q150 Chair: Paris Lees, what about vulnerable women? You must have met some. I can't believe that in your life as a sex worker you did not meet some young women or men who had been forced to do this because they had been trafficked and were the subject of criminal gangs who made them do this. I cannot believe that everyone decided to pursue the career in the way that you have done.

Paris Lees: Well I can't believe that I am speaking to seven middle-aged men in suits who are telling me that this is violence against women. That completely overlooks the fact that guys and transgender people do this as well. To characterise this as exploitation of women is completely ridiculous. If there is exploitation, that is already illegal. No, I have not met anybody like that. I have friends who I have done it with—friends who I used to work with. A friend of mine who did it did not encourage me to do it, but I saw she was doing all right and she had money. These were not screwed up people. Sure, I am from a very poor area—Nottingham, which is one of the poorest areas of the country according to a report I read in 2013, I think. Yes, people do have to make tough choices, but guess what? My grandad had to work down a coal mine. Sometimes people have to do things that—

Q151 Chair: My question is did you meet anyone who was forced to do this for criminal gain by other people? The only people you have met in your career as a sex worker are people who did it voluntarily, is that right?

Paris Lees: That's right, but you say you cannot believe that. Why is it so incredible? If there are so many of them, surely the evidence will show that. Why don't you speak to these people who have been forced into it, if they are out there?

Dr Magnanti: And go into the question—

Q152 Chair: I will come to you in one second, Dr Magnanti. I put it to you because that is what people have said to us. We have had quite a long inquiry and other women have said that they have been exploited.

Paris Lees: Who?

Q153 Chair: I cannot give you the names and details, but they are on the website.

Paris Lees: It seems to me that you have had some people at this inquiry who have absolutely no business talking about sex work; people whose only qualification seems to be that they write for *The Observer*. With all due respect, James, have you ever been in a position where you felt that you needed to sell your body for sex?

James Berry: No—

Paris Lees: It's a fair question.

Chair: It is but it is not a question—

Paris Lees: I think he wants to answer.

Chair: He is not in a position to answer. Ms Lees, when Mr Berry asks you the question you can come to him and put it directly back at him.

Paris Lees: My point is that we are here talking about decisions that are not going to affect any of you or some of the people you have invited to speak here.

Chair: I take your point, and that is why we have invited you to come here.

Dr Magnanti: But it is not going to affect us.

Paris Lees: It is not going to affect us.

Dr Magnanti: This is the thing. We have both left sex work. Of the four sex workers that you have spoken to face to face, three of us are not doing it any more. You have only spoken to one person face to face who is actually currently a sex worker.

Who are the people who should have been asked to be at this table instead of us today? The current sex workers—people from Sex Worker Open University, from the English Collective of Prostitutes, from SCOT-PEP. But they weren't asked because me and Paris, we come with great big media platforms; we come and we bring attention. We are the merkin for these proceedings, so you can tick a box and say, "We spoke to some ex-sex workers." I retired in 2004. I can tell you everything about what was happening in 2003 and 2004. What is going to happen in the laws going forward does not affect me. You need to speak with the biggest stakeholders—those who are the current sex workers and the organisations representing them.

Q154 Chair: We have done. Not all the witnesses whom we've spoken to want to speak in public. When we went to Denmark and Sweden and spoke to workers out there, they were not prepared to—

Dr Magnanti: That isn't what I was given to understand.

Chair: Well, I'm telling you how we conduct our inquiries. If people come forward and ask to give evidence, we obviously would like them to come. They can also give written evidence; they do not all have to give oral evidence. We want to understand this problem of decriminalisation and that is why we have invited you.

Dr Magnanti: Do you think of decriminalisation as a problem?

Chair: No, I think the whole issue causes a lot of controversy. That is why it is important that we look at it.

Dr Magnanti: It causes controversy, but do you think it is ipso facto a problem?

Paris Lees: Controversy isn't a problem in and of itself. Can we identify what the actual problem is?

Q155 Chair: Indeed. That is one of the points that we hope to discover during this inquiry. I have a final question for you. It concerns those who advertise on websites like Sugar Babies, those who are still at school and university—you described how you were in the same position and felt you had to do it. Do you think there should be better regulation of websites that are used in this way or are you happy with the law as it stands?

Paris Lees: I don't really know much about the law about websites but I think there should be better regulation full stop. I don't think that making something underground makes people safer. I am not sure. What is the problem that you want to solve? Do you want to discourage people from doing sex work? If so, I would ask why—why do you want to discourage people from doing that? It just makes no sense to me. I don't know what this inquiry wants to achieve. It is looking at how to end sex work. My question is: why do you want to end sex work?

Chair: Let us turn to Mr Burrowes, who originally suggested this inquiry, which has been very interesting for the Committee. Parliament has never looked at the law on prostitution before.

Q156 Mr Burrowes: First of all, in the context of the Swedish model, they make the case in principle in relation to violence against women and this being a gender issue, as you talked about, but it is not alone. We have heard evidence from prosecuting authorities. The Crown Prosecution Service has written in its documents that prostitution is a form of violence against women. We are not necessarily looking at our views; we are just interrogating the views that are coming across. Do you see any examples at all of prostitution being about violence against women, or anything to do with coercion?

Paris Lees: Violence against women is already illegal, and trafficking is already illegal. You may as well have a Select Committee on whether or not we criminalise people who pay for cleaners because you object to slavery. With the greatest respect, may I ask you if you have ever been in a position where you felt that you needed to sell your body for sex?

Mr Burrowes: I am asking the questions.

Paris Lees: You're asking the questions. Okay, well, I'm going to take a wild guess and say that you haven't. You are making decisions—

Mr Burrowes: I am just asking a question.

Paris Lees: What is your interest? What do you know about it?

Mr Burrowes: I'm asking the questions.

Dr Magnanti: But you work for us.

Mr Burrowes: No, I don't.

Dr Magnanti: Do you not? I'm sorry, what pays your wages?

Mr Burrowes: My constituents are my bosses, not you.

Dr Magnanti: Who are your bosses?

Mr Burrowes: You are here to answer questions. You were invited to answer questions. If you don't want to, you don't need to be here.

Dr Magnanti: I am, but I also think that you have a responsibility to us, because it was very clear to me, from the questions that I was briefed on and that I was going to be answering that I was going to be asked about things that bore absolutely no relationship to the written evidence that I submitted. I was going to be asked how I felt about eastern Europeans, as if I were an eastern European. It really does seem to me that we have legitimate questions to ask about what this Committee is doing.

Q157 Mr Burrowes: In your written evidence, you make reference to Amnesty International and their views in relation to full decriminalisation. They advocate it for sex work that does not involve coercion, exploitation or abuse. On the back of that part of your submission, I ask the question: do you see any—

Dr Magnanti: But I am not here as a representative of Amnesty International. Should you not have asked one of them?

Q158 Mr Burrowes: No, I am referring to your submission in relation to—

Dr Magnanti: So because I have made reference to Amnesty International, I am responsible for answering for their policy?

Q159 Mr Burrowes: You can ask the questions around my questions. I am asking you a direct question and you can answer it or not. Do you see any sex work as involving coercion, exploitation or abuse?

Dr Magnanti: No.

Paris Lees: By definition, it is not sex work if it involves coercion or abuse.

Dr Magnanti: Exactly.

Q160 Mr Burrowes: Do you see any evidence of entry into sex work being an issue that involves people under the age of 18?

Dr Magnanti: Statistically speaking—

Paris Lees: Don't bother with statistics and facts and things like that. They don't want their heads muddled.

Chair: Order, Ms Lees. If Dr Magnanti has some statistics that she wishes to share with the Committee, we would be very happy to hear them.

Dr Magnanti: As a quick summary, just as an overview: I looked at these worldwide, country by country, and the available evidence—obviously for countries such as the UK in western Europe, it is very slightly higher than it is for the rest of the world. In the UK, according to Church et al, the mean is 23 years of age for entry for indoor workers—people such as myself and Paris—and 20 for outdoor. Ward finds that the mean is 24. Jeal and Salisbury find that it is 23.

Over in Ireland, they went with ranges rather than exact numbers. The most common answer, over 50%, was ages 18 to 24. That is five times what it was for the under-18s. In Northern Ireland, 18 to 21 was the range. In Australia, Roxburgh et al gave it as 21. In Switzerland, Brossier gives it as 24. In Canada, O'Doherty gives it as 21, and Goldenberg as 20. In New Zealand, Abel says ages 18 to 21 are the most common answers, and almost—nearly always—50% or higher, for when people first enter sex work.

I was 27. If you look at the websites, of course if you go online they subtract ages. I was advertised as being 23, so I had to pretend to be almost five years younger than I was. That is very common. If you are just looking at the websites as a source for who the people are in sex work, of course they are exaggerations. I know a sex worker who, on the internet, is forever 39, but she is really 43.

Q161 Mr Burrowes: We are looking at our current criminal law and where it needs to be changed. One part of it is that, if you are under 18, prostitution is effectively classified as exploitation. Do you agree with that?

Dr Magnanti: As Paris rightly pointed out, if people are coerced, if they are trafficked or if they are under age, we already have adequate laws to cover that. We don't need to qualify sex work, on the whole, as being abuse against those people, because they are already covered by laws about sexual exploitation, sexual abuse and rape.

Q162 James Berry: The answer to your question, Ms Lees, is no, as you would expect. I have not reached any conclusion about whether the law is right or wrong. What we are trying to do is to explore whether the law is right or wrong—*[Interruption.]* Let me finish, please. If any changes need to be made to the law, Parliament is the only place that is going to do that. Dr Magnanti suggested a sensible change about the brothel keeping issue, because not allowing two women to work in the same room can lead to risk. That change is not going to be made unless this Committee makes a recommendation and the Government accepts it, which is why we are holding this inquiry and why your evidence will be really helpful if you answer the questions. I know that you have criticised who we have heard so far in this

inquiry, but we will be hearing from other people. We have recently gone to Sweden and Denmark, and we have spoken to a large number of charities. The evidence that they gave is slightly different from what you said. The evidence that they gave was that, in their experience, the large majority of women involved in prostitution are involved against their will and do not have a particularly pleasant experience, but they accept that a small proportion of women involved in prostitution—

Dr Magnanti: But you didn't speak to—

James Berry: Just let me finish, please. They accept that a small proportion of women involved in prostitution do so voluntarily and have no problem with it, and both of you are included in that. Of course, all laws must have a purpose behind them. As you know, we have heard from witnesses, whose views differ from yours and who are very trenchant about what the purpose of the law should be. Do you think that the purpose of the law should be to reduce the overall amount of sex work that takes place, or to protect, so far as possible, women who choose to go into sex work?

Dr Magnanti: I have a three-part answer. First, my understanding of your visit to Sweden is that you did not speak to anybody, for example, Pye Jakobsson of the Rose Alliance, who represents a sex worker-led organisation. Rather, you spoke to charities that support the sex buyer laws that currently exist.

James Berry: They didn't, actually.

Dr Magnanti: Part of the problem with the statistics that are currently being produced by Sweden is that they don't have any statistics from before the law came into effect, so they make all kinds of claims about how much they have reduced street prostitution and how the people in prostitution feel about it, but in fact they were not polling any sex workers to get a before and after.

The “doctor” part of my name deals on a daily basis with population statistics, and there are a lot of trash population statistics that get bandied about, especially when we talk about places like Sweden and other countries that have either instituted the full sex buyer ban or portions thereof, such as Northern Ireland. They have no basis for comparison, and they have no baseline, so I would be very, very sceptical of anything they are producing. When you look at the statistics worldwide, and when you look at the countries that are most affected by trafficking, we are talking about countries such as India and Cambodia, which unsurprisingly also have very strong sex worker-led organisations. The percentage of people who are actively trafficked is comfortably under 5%. I agree with what all of you are thinking right now, which is that even one is too many. That is absolutely the case, which is why you need input from sex worker-led organisations, which are best placed to be able to identify the needs for finding out where the abuses are happening.

Q163 James Berry: Okay, but would you mind just answering the question? I would really like to get both your answers. Do you think that the aim of the law should be to reduce the overall amount of sex work that takes place or to protect women who choose to undertake it?

Dr Magnanti: I do not really think that should be in there, because it is a very unpredictable thing. For example, when I became a sex worker I was paying

university fees of £10,000-plus a year and the associated costs. That was not the case for home and EU students at the time. Obviously, that has changed, so there has been an influx of student sex workers since then. We need to look at the root causes, at what are the push factors rather than the pull factors. These are things that are very much outside of a very focused law that only deals with, “We need to decrease sex workers”.

Q164 James Berry: Ms Lees, what is your view on what the purpose of the law that we have should be?

Paris Lees: I would like to respond to your original comment first. It is great that you have an open mind and I really respect that, but I think I was raising a legitimate objection to the fact that sex work is described as violence against women in the literature around this Committee. That is setting out a moral position. I know a lot of sex workers. I have five or six friends back in Nottingham who are sex workers. Three of them are guys. I am transgender, I know lots of people in the LGBT community, I know lots of gay guys who escort, so it just seems bizarre to me that we are legislating in a way that is going to affect those people and describing it as a women-only issue. This is annoying because Harriet Harman described sex work as abuse against women. I was not abused. Were you abused?

Dr Magnanti: No.

Paris Lees: I questioned her about this on Twitter and she said, “Oh, that’s just what I think”. You can’t tell me that I’ve been abused. This stuff really matters. Should we find ways to make it happen less? Good luck with that. No, I don’t think you are going to stop people.

Q165 James Berry: Do you then think that the purpose of the law should be to protect women, as far as possible, who choose to be prostitutes?

Paris Lees: Absolutely. Let’s say you’ve got a client who is going to see an escort, maybe in a brothel or on the internet. They think that the person seems a little edgy, doesn’t seem very happy and they suspect that they may have been trafficked. What client is going to go to the police and raise their concerns if they know that they are going to be outing themselves as a criminal? How does that make sex workers safer?

Q166 James Berry: That is a good point. Finally, what, specifically, would you change about the law as it stands now? We have already heard the issue about two prostitutes working in the same building, which is a good point. Is there anything else, apart from that, that you would change about the existing law?

Paris Lees: There are two things. I cannot claim to know the law inside-out; I have come here today to talk about my personal experiences as a former sex worker, but, as I say, of course, you are safer if you are working with somebody. I lived in Brighton about five or six years ago, I was at university there, and there was a sex worker called Andrea Waddell who was murdered. She worked in a flat on her own. I cannot help but wonder if that wouldn’t have happened if she had been in a house with other people. This is the reality: you are not safe on your own.

What are you going to do if a client turns violent on you? It has never happened to me, but, of course, you are safer when you are with other people. So I think that this brothel-keeping nonsense needs to go and people need to be safer. Labour, the party that is supposed to stand up for marginalised people and for workers, should actually be advocating for this and allowing sex workers to come together to work in collectives where they feel empowered and safe and not that they are going to be criminalised. That is the first thing.

Secondly, I think it is complete madness to say, “Oh, well, we’ll end demand”. It just doesn’t work, you’re not going to stop it. As long as you’ve got people and a financial system in which people use money, you are going to have people who want to pay for sex.

Chair: Thank you.

James Berry: Thank you for your very trenchantly expressed views. We should have had you in when we had the lady from UK Feminista, who you obviously disagree with. It would have been good if we had had you together.

Dr Magnanti: If I can make a very quick addendum, while we are in a spirit of suggestions, the other thing I would suggest, which has worked out very well in the state of Louisiana in the United States, is wiping the criminal record of people who have been previously convicted for soliciting or brothel keeping. If you really want people to get on with their lives, they should be able to go and apply for jobs, especially if you consider these people to be victims. We can disagree on that point or not, but if you consider that they are victims and that their lives should be improved, people going about with criminal records for having been soliciting on the streets or having been working with a maid in a walk-up is unacceptable.

Paris Lees: Hear, hear.

Q167 Chair: Just to clarify, Ms Lees, the reference to violence against women was in a series of questions that the Committee asked in our press release. It was not the view of the Committee. The Committee will decide its views on this at the end of the inquiry, after we have taken all the evidence. Just to be clear, it was in a press release.

I am not sure that we can describe Mr Jayawardena as middle-aged.

Paris Lees: My apologies.

Chair: I think so—an apology is due.

Paris Lees: Listen: your sex work age would be considerably lower.

Q168 Mr Jayawardena: If I may ask you about some international comparisons, around the world, countries have adopted various approaches towards prostitution. Which model would you prefer to see replicated in the United Kingdom? It does not have to be exactly either of these systems, but a legalised regulated system, such as is the case in Germany and the Netherlands, or a fully decriminalised system, such as the system in New Zealand?

Paris Lees: I would like to see what has happened in New Zealand. I have never been there or spoken to sex workers there, but they seem to be more able to report crime over there.

Dr Magnanti: Friends of mine have worked in New Zealand and also in New South Wales in Australia, which has a very similar system.

Q169 Mr Jayawardena: So you both agree that the fully decriminalised approach would be better? I have another question, then. There are lots of statistics that any of us could look at. Since the European, or Nordic model, if I can call it that, was adopted by Sweden 16 years ago, not a single prostitute has been murdered by a client. That is a legalised, regulated system. In New Zealand, by contrast, with half the population of Sweden, they have lost several prostitutes to murders; so I am struggling with how a fully decriminalised system is safer for prostitutes.

Dr Magnanti: On the one hand, you are comparing countries that have very different laws with regards to walking around armed, so that is something we can put to the side. But in terms of referring to dead bodies—that very emotive subject—what we have in Sweden is a system that absolutely depersonalises sex workers, to the point where a sex work activist was murdered by her ex-husband. That happened at a visitation. Her children had been taken away from her; he was known to be abusive to her, but full custody was given to him. She was prevented from seeing her own children for years. The first time that she was allowed access to those children, her known to be abusive, known to be violent, ex-husband stabbed her to death in front of their own children. He was enabled by a system in Sweden that calls wanting to be a sex worker a pathology. Technically, by the laws on their books, they don't criminalise it, but the way they treat sex workers is as if we are children; as if we should be wards of the state, with no ability to make our own decisions. That was something that really struck at the heart of sex work advocacy, because decriminalisation is not an end goal; it is a first step. Decriminalisation is simply baseline, the starting line. As with any kind of work, anything that is decriminalised—selling alcohol, for example—we still have regulations that come into play about zoning, about where and when things are allowed to happen. Don't think of decriminalisation, don't think that anybody is advocating it as a free-for-all. It is actually a first step, which is then followed up.

Going back to the second part of your question, it was found that sex work was highly stigmatised in New Zealand. Absolutely, there is still violence, but it is improving. People feel that the stigma is dying off; people feel that the individual instances of violence against sex workers are going down. It is not just a, "Make a law, snap your fingers and everything is going to be okay" kind of moment. You have to put it into the greater context of each society that these kinds of laws are enacted in.

Q170 Mr Jayawardena: That is very helpful. We have heard from witnesses on a previous panel that the sex bylaw has reduced overall levels of prostitution in Sweden by about half. Do you recognise that figure, and has the criminalisation of purchase ended the sale of sex or has it simply changed the ways in which it is sold?

Dr Magnanti: I recognise the figure because it gets repeated a lot, but, again, going back to what I was saying to Mr Berry earlier, Sweden did not have a baseline measure of where it was at. They say it has gone down 50%, but they don't have a starting amount. Compared with what? It is absolute guesswork. Also, when they use that figure they are not talking about all sex work; they are talking about visible, on-the-street sex work—what we would consider to be the cliché of the woman leaning into the car. There is other evidence that shows that indoor sex work has gone up, and there is even more evidence that has shown that trafficking is going up in Sweden because the people who are going into sex work feel unsafe. If they cannot turn to the police and they cannot turn to the state, who do they go to? They go to criminals. That is why decriminalisation is needed.

Q171 Mr Jayawardena: On that basis, a proposed change from the status quo in the United Kingdom to something like the Swedish model is not helpful.

Dr Magnanti: I don't think it would be, no.

Q172 Mr Jayawardena: May I pursue one question with Dr Magnanti directly? You have long advocated decriminalisation—

Dr Magnanti: I haven't always, actually.

Mr Jayawardena: But you've long advocated it.

Dr Magnanti: Since around 2012.

Chair: That's quite long.

Dr Magnanti: There was a much longer period of not.

Mr Jayawardena: A week is a long time in politics.

Dr Magnanti: Indeed.

Q173 Mr Jayawardena: Many critics of yours would argue that your time as a high-class escort earning hundreds of pounds bears little resemblance to the experience of many sex workers working on the street and in brothels who may struggle with addictions and the threat of violence. Do you accept that your positive experiences as a sex worker may be unrepresentative of many out there?

Dr Magnanti: Absolutely. There is no one sex worker who is representative of all sex work. As I said to Mr Vaz earlier, doesn't everybody in sex work deserve to feel as safe and secure in their work as I did? Don't we owe it to the people who are out on the street to think that when they are in danger they can pick up the phone and speak to the police or social services? They don't currently feel that way, which is why we have things such as National Ugly Mugs, where sex workers are sharing information between themselves because they do not feel safe enough going to the police. By and large, where both sides of sex work are criminalised—I am talking about places such as the United States, which has, by any standards, an incredibly repressive model that,

let's be fair, I don't think anybody wants to implement—the most frequent rapists of sex workers are actually the police.

Q174 Mr Jayawardena: But you're not suggesting that that is the case here.

Dr Magnanti: No, I'm not, but when you say you are looking at models worldwide, that puts it in context.

Q175 Mr Jayawardena: So what you are saying is that we need to ensure that, when crimes are committed, people feel able to report them to the police.

Dr Magnanti: Absolutely.

Q176 Mr Jayawardena: Would you agree with that as well, Ms Lees?

Paris Lees: I would agree with that. In answer to your original question, have we found a country with a model where they have completely got rid of sex work? I don't think we have, have we? Ultimately, we need to accept that people are going to do this on some level. Again, I can speak only from my personal experiences. I once had to call the police about a client. He was drunk and became very hostile and aggressive and I didn't feel safe. I called the police and they were really good. They turned up and there were loads of them—five or six. I felt able to do that because although there is a lot of confusion about just what is and isn't illegal, I thought that I was okay. It wouldn't have made me safer if buying sex work had been criminalised. As regards Brooke's experiences being quite privileged, they probably are compared with some people's.

Dr Magnanti: I'm not denying that.

Paris Lees: I've done the high-class thing and I've also been on the street before. I have seen lots of different aspects of sex work. The parts of town I was in were the really dodgy, rough parts of town because that's where you go—that's where people go missing.

Q177 Chair: But isn't that the problem: the difficulty of legislating when you have, at least, a two-tier system? You can have someone earning a lot of money per night, some £1,200—I think Helen Wood was an example—and this morning, when I was talking to BBC Radio Leeds, there was an 18-year-old eastern European girl who was earning £5 a night. It is difficult for Parliament to legislate to cover both those examples, isn't it?

Dr Magnanti: I completely agree with you. Part of the problem is that you are talking about extremes. Good laws are never made out of the extremes. You have the 10% at the top end like me, who are advertised on very glossy websites, and it is all very lah-di-dah. Then you have the 10% at the bottom who are in absolutely desperate circumstances. We are missing what is going on in the middle and the variety, which Paris is possibly more representative of than I am, of what is going on in the middle. Those are the people who need money for the same reasons as anybody who goes to work in a supermarket or in a night-time bakery, baking things for the supermarket. So, really, when we look at the Helen Woods or the Belle de Jours of the world, we

say, “Well, there’s her and there’s everyone else”. Assuming that a two-tier system exists is to overlook the vast middle. More than 80% of sex workers are in the middle.

Chair: That is a very important point.

Q178 Mr Winnick: I have listened very carefully to the evidence you have given, as all my colleagues have. Recognising the exceptions, would it not be correct to say that, to a very large extent, those who come into prostitution in the main have problems that perhaps other women or other males do not have, such as family problems or abuse, and that they go into prostitution first and foremost for economic reasons? They do not particularly want to be sex workers, but it is a means of getting a livelihood that, otherwise, they would not be able to obtain. Would that be a realistic picture?

Dr Magnanti: But isn’t that most jobs?

Paris Lees: Don’t most people work for economic reasons?

Mr Winnick: Yes.

Paris Lees: I worked in a call centre when I was 16, selling dodgy timeshares for economic reasons. I didn’t like it but I was paid for it. That is the nature of work, surely. Yes, people do it because they need to do it but if we are really concerned about people from marginalised backgrounds, such as me, we need to look at austerity, the dismantling of the welfare state, and people having safe routes to get here from other countries if they are fleeing and they are desperate.

Q179 Mr Winnick: That more or less confirms what I was saying. They are marginalised because of various failures, which you have just mentioned. Therefore, they are somewhat different from others. Most people, unless they have a private income or expect to inherit a great deal of money or a combination of both, have no alternative but to find jobs. The picture being painted may be totally wrong—we are learning—but is it not possible that there is a difference between the vast majority of those who take up employment as there is no alternative, and those who take up work as sex workers?

Dr Magnanti: Are you asking whether there is some kind of—

Mr Winnick: Special factors, yes.

Dr Magnanti: Something that makes me as an individual different?

Mr Winnick: Economic factors.

Dr Magnanti: Well, going back to reinforce what Paris was saying, the economic factors vary. It could be a non-EU migrant such as me, who has absolutely no recourse to other funds, and the employment that is available—where it is available—would not have paid the bills, or we could be talking about people who go from being marginally in the black to in the red because of the bedroom tax and because of the failure of the social safety net to catch them, which, unfortunately, is happening to an increasing level.

Mr Winnick: As a Labour Member, I would not disagree with that.

Paris Lees: David, I would really like to answer your question. I can only speak about my own personal experience. As I say, I am from a really rough estate in Nottingham. I am transgender and, like many transgender people, I experienced family rejection as a teenager when I came out at 18. I had applied to go to university and I was the first person in my family to go to university. My dad is a doorman and my mum worked in a pub when I was growing up. She has a better job now. I was not getting proper support on the NHS, like many transgender people. I did not feel safe living in student halls because I had mental health issues at the time. I was suffering from depression and things. I did not have a nice middle class family to bankroll me. I had to pay for laser hair removal, which is not available on the NHS in any case. I needed to work and I had problems leaving the house.

Sex work helped me. The point is that I would have remained marginalised if it hadn't been for sex work: I wouldn't have my degree, I wouldn't have been able to establish a career. I know people from my home town who have nothing. We weren't ever raised to believe we would have anything. A few years ago, I heard someone speaking at the Fabian Society, which I'm sure you're all aware of. It was a middle-class commentator; she was saying, "We were told that if we worked hard, these were the things we could have—we could have a house, we could have stability." I was never told that. I thought the best I could hope for was a job in the pub and maybe buying my own council house. Sex work has allowed me to find a way out of that. It is the reason why I am privileged now and not marginalised.

I'm not allowed to ask you questions, but I guess my question would be "What would you have done for me?" How else could I have got out of being marginalised? What are the alternatives?

Q180 Mr Winnick: There is one other aspect, which is different. You say, "Other people take employment of various kinds—what's the difference with being a sex worker?". I suppose the concern is over violence: sex workers, particularly women, are more likely to be subject to violence, and sometimes murderous violence, than other employees. Isn't that a factor that this Committee should take into account?

Paris Lees: Absolutely. The other difference from sex work—again, I don't speak for all sex workers—is that when I worked in a call centre, I think it was £5 a hour, but when I was doing all right, it was £200 or £300. If you need money, you're going to go for the one that pays more, aren't you? If it's slightly more dangerous, I repeat that that's because it's been pushed underground; it's made seedy. When I had to call the police that time—let's say it had been illegal for me to be selling sex. First, I probably wouldn't have called the police. Secondly, if I had, let's say one of them wanted to coerce me into doing something, because they knew I wouldn't object because they've got this thing hanging over me. If it's dangerous, let's look at ways to make it safer. Surely the best way to do that is to allow people to come together as collectives, to make it all above board and out in the open—taxed, even, if you like.

Dr Magnanti: I paid taxes.

Paris Lees: Did you?

Dr Magnanti: I had an accountant and all.

Chair: Excellent. Thank you very much. I am sure Mr Osborne will be pleased about that.

We need to move on; we have other questions and we need to end the session. This is just to let you know that Mr McDonald only turned 38 last week. Stuart McDonald.

Paris Lees: A spring chicken!

Q181 Stuart C. McDonald: A question that follows what you said about decriminalisation not being the end goal, Dr Magnanti, what would you describe as the end goal? Is it to see prostitution on a par with other career choices and as legitimate as other career choices, or would you not go as far as that? If you would go as far as that, how would you make that happen? What else needs to happen?

Dr Magnanti: How would I do it? Well, I'd wave my magic wand—

Stuart C. McDonald: First of all, is that what you're aiming for, ultimately?

Dr Magnanti: I think that's a fair interpretation of what I said. First, decriminalisation: getting rid of the penalties against sex workers, the brothel-keeping penalties that penalise them for working together or even sharing premises, the laws that penalise them for solicitation. Then if you look further, for example at what's been done in New South Wales and Australia, you have different types of sex workers. You have people who are freelancers, if you will—escorts working out of their home or doing outcalls to people's hotels. You also have licensed brothels.

There could be some kind of licensing in place. For example, the analogy I drew was with the decriminalisation of alcohol. I'm American originally, so this is a big deal for us: the lessons of prohibition loom extremely large. After prohibition was overturned, it wasn't just a free-for-all—not just anybody can make and sell alcohol, but the drinking of it was legalised. Then, of course, you see where there are various laws put in place that kind of nudge things into a safer place.

The bottom line really has to be overall safety. We have to prioritise the safety of the people doing the work, wherever they happen to be doing it, whether it is on their own premises, whether it is a shared premises with other sex workers, or whether it is in a brothel, on camera or what-have-you.

Q182 Stuart C. McDonald: Ms Lees, is the end goal to see prostitution as legitimate a career option as anything else? If so, what—beyond decriminalisation—has to happen to allow that to take place?

Paris Lees: “As legitimate a career option as anything else”—well, that would be nice, wouldn't it? I think there is always going to be a moral position on sex work, just because it involves sex and that is what human morals, morality, laws and social customs have traditionally concerned themselves with—what people can and cannot do sexually. I believe in consent; I believe that consenting adults should be allowed to

do what they want with one another and that the state has no business telling them that they can't.

The end point is reducing stigma. The worst part of being a sex worker for me was the social stigma—telling people at university, “This is how I make my money”, because I’ve never been ashamed of what I did. It was a choice that I made, I was an adult and I was happy to do it, and they would go, “Oh, you should respect yourself more”, and they’d shame me and they would judge me and they would try to dissuade me from doing it. What this boils down to is people just don’t want you to do it and they want to try to find ways to stop you from doing it, and that is what I object to.

Q183 Stuart C. McDonald: Following on from that, despite what you’re saying about trying to make it seem as legitimate a career choice as anything else, at times during your evidence sessions both of you have sort of talked about it almost as if it was a matter of last resort—there was no option for you other than to work as prostitutes. Is that because of the stigma that you have just referred to? It’s not because you have a particular view that that is a less desirable option?

Dr Magnanti: The stigma is absolutely part of that; it is because you know how people will react. It’s not that I felt any qualms particularly; if we’re being quite frank, I was hardly a virgin at the age of 27 and never married. That didn’t trouble me. It was more my concern about how the people around me would react and whether there would be blowback onto my science career once people knew.

Paris Lees: I think that we’re getting a little bit confused. Just because you feel like you have to do something doesn’t mean you’ve been coerced into doing it. I was in a little bit of debt before Christmas and I was offered my first acting gig earlier this year. It was up in Manchester and I didn’t really know if I wanted to do it, and it wasn’t convenient for me to do it, but I kind of felt like I had to, because I get a couple of grand for it.

What does it mean? My mum has to get up and go to work. If you’re getting paid to do something and you’re making a choice—a lot of people don’t want to work. That’s the nature of work—that’s why you get paid for it—but it doesn’t mean that you’ve been forced. You choose the work that you want to be paid for, and for me, at that time in my life, it was sex work.

Q184 Stuart C. McDonald: Sure—absolutely—although I think you said that if you’d had other options, you might have done something else. What you are saying is that it is not so much about banning any particular option; it is about making those options more realistic and available.

Paris Lees: Guess what? If I could be Madonna’s stylist and pick out clothes all day, in an ideal world that’s what I would choose, but I choose to write things because that is how I make money at the moment.

Dr Magnanti: Same.

Paris Lees: And I choose to go on television, and I choose to do things like that, and I get paid for it, but if I had better options I might stop doing it.

Q185 Stuart C. McDonald: One last question, if I may, to clear something up. A couple of times you referred to problems that prostitutes might have in contacting the police or other services, but if we decriminalised the selling of sex and criminalised the purchase of sex why would prostitutes have a difficulty in contacting the police?

Dr Magnanti: Because they know they become the evidence, and this has been the case in countries like Sweden, where the sex worker contacts the police and she may not be arrested for selling sex but she has identified herself as a sex worker to the police, so they are instantly suspicious: “We need to see your papers; we need to see whether you are legal to be here; we need to examine your premises,” and all the rest of it. She may also be coerced by the police into giving evidence against other people. Things that have happened in Sweden include people’s phones being bugged and people being thrown out of where they live because their landlords are afraid that they are going to be prosecuted as pimps. Yes, technically the selling of sex is not illegal, but it makes an environment where they fear the reaction of all of the people around them. Those people around them, once they know that they are sex workers, fear being prosecuted by that law.

Paris Lees: I would like to answer the questions.

Chair: Very quickly, because we need to move on to Mr Loughton.

Paris Lees: I have been in the situation before where clients call you up, and maybe your rate is £100 for whatever, and they will say, “Oh, you know, I’ve only got £80” and whatnot. By criminalising the buying of sex and maybe, yes, dissuading some people from doing it, you have got fewer clients. When you haven’t had a client for a few days and you really need some money and your rent is due on Monday you are going to be more willing to accept—and it is about empowering. I think anything that disempowers sex workers is not going to make them feel like they are part of the process. The other thing that I would say is—you know, should we try and dissuade it; would that help? If that group of people want to pay for sex and that group of people want to be paid for sex, why would you even want to reduce it?

Chair: Thank you. Final question, Mr Loughton.

Q186 Tim Loughton: Dr Magnanti, your point about Sweden and prostitutes effectively becoming prosecution witnesses against their own clients is absolutely right, from our visit there.

I think it was President Reagan who said that prostitution was the oldest profession for which no formal qualification was deemed necessary, and politics was the second—so we actually might have quite a lot in common. Can I gently say that I think you may have pre-judged this inquiry to a degree. I do not know what our findings are going to be. For my part, as we have gone on, I am increasingly of the view that decriminalising—having everything above board, so that sex workers have full protection, and concentrating on the real criminals in this, who are those who exploit sex workers—is an increasingly attractive way to go.

I also think you are being slightly selective in the reading of what we have done. If you look at the transcript of our previous witnesses you will see that I and others question seriously the qualification of violence against women, asking how you define men sex workers and others,

and that those answers were found lacking, as they were in Sweden. However, as you have said, you are not representative of sex workers. Do you acknowledge that there are people involved in sex work in this country who are effectively trapped in it?

Dr Magnanti: I would not call them sex workers, though, and I think that is where we have a problem of terminology. If somebody is having sex against their will, that's rape, you know.

Paris Lees: I have two things to say. Again—the cleaning analogy. If you are a cleaner, what does that mean, to be trapped? If someone has to clean to make money, does that make that person a slave? No, it doesn't. It just means that that's their job. There's a difference between slaves and cleaners, and there's a difference between sex workers and people who are being forced to have sex against their will and are effectively being raped.

In response to your comments, I would like to say this: I'm sorry if I seem a little bit prickly, but the fact is that we are all very privileged people in this room. You are so privileged sitting here, and you get to make decisions that affect the lives of people who aren't in this room. We are here talking to you today is because we are also privileged now. It is just very frustrating that people are authoring reports arguing that the purchase of sex should be criminalised when they have never had to make these decisions. So I just find it very frustrating.

Q187 Tim Loughton: I understand. Whether we are privileged or not, we have not yet written a Report. We have made no recommendations, and we have a responsibility to seek and take evidence where we can find it. We have more evidence to take, which I think might fill some of the gaps you have identified.

Going back to your definition of a sex worker, let's take an 18 or 19-year-old girl who is a prostitute on the streets and may have an addiction to drugs or alcohol, and who may be in debt to a pimp because she has been trafficked or manipulated in some way. Is that person not trapped?

Paris Lees: I feel like you are obfuscating the issue.

Tim Loughton: I was quite clear. It was a quite clear, very realistic example.

Paris Lees: Well, okay, let me be clear then. I was in debt before Christmas and I took a job because I needed some money. Lots of people are desperate in this country at the moment and are having to do things to get money. That is not the same as being coerced. People make decisions—unless they are being forced, are locked in a house and don't speak English. I am sure that there probably are people who are being abused in that way and that is a terrible, horrible thing, but I do not think that that is the basis for making laws that affect countless people who are just getting on with it and are happy to do it.

Q188 Tim Loughton: So let's go back to this example. You do not think that there are people in that position who are trapped, who would like to come out of prostitution. You acknowledged that there are some people who have got into prostitution for whatever reasons and would now like to come out of it but cannot, because they see it as the only way they can

earn money to feed an addiction or pay a pimp, and they are being manipulated. Is that not a good definition of someone who is trapped and for whom the law might need to change, to help them safely out of prostitution, if that is really what they want?

Paris Lees: I find the example bizarre. There are lots of people who probably feel trapped in their jobs and feel that they cannot leave because they need to work to survive. I did not have a drug problem. It is a very complex issue. Yes, I know people who took drugs on the street, but that was people with drug problems or mental health issues, so you would have to take them on a case-by-case basis. I do not think that plucking a hypothetical situation out of the air helps.

Q189 Tim Loughton: Okay, let me put forward a hypothetical situation that is backed up by statistics, without going into the statistics. Would you acknowledge that it is the case that sex workers disproportionately have a drug or alcohol addiction—

Dr Magnanti: The statistics do not show that.

Tim Loughton: Let me finish. Also, that disproportionately to their peer group they may have a history of being abused as children—

Dr Magnanti: These are not statistics.

Tim Loughton: And disproportionately, against their peer group, they are subject to violence and murder. Of course, we have many examples. That is the difference between being a sex worker and being someone who works in a call centre—

Dr Magnanti: Okay, the first example—

Chair: Dr Magnanti, we just cannot make a record of this if people talk over each other. Have you finished, Mr Loughton?

Tim Loughton: That is why I am trying to differentiate between someone who is a sex worker and someone who chooses to work in a call centre. There is a difference. Can you not acknowledge that?

Paris Lees: Okay, I would like to answer. I read something the other day that said that people who have been abused as children are four times more likely to have plastic surgery as adults. What are you going to do—ban plastic surgery? Yes, LGBT people are more likely to suffer mental issues. People from ethnic minorities are more likely to suffer mental health issues. These are complicated issues. Will you stop people doing things because they come from certain backgrounds?

If people are not able to make decisions for themselves, they are not able to make decisions for themselves, but the reality is that there are a lot of people who have suffered abuse and they are just doing what they need to do to get on. It is confusing the issue to confuse it with drug addiction.

Q190 Tim Loughton: So you do not think that sex workers are proportionately more vulnerable in any of those terms than their peer group?

Paris Lees: As I have said several times, the ways in which they are vulnerable and the ways in which I felt, or was, more vulnerable are due to the way the law criminalises aspects of sex work at the moment.

Tim Loughton: Yes, but you have admitted that you are not representative—

Paris Lees: But you are asking—

Tim Loughton: Perhaps Dr Magnanti, you can—

Paris Lees: No one is representative of all sex workers.

Q191 Tim Loughton: Quite so. Therefore, do you not acknowledge, from an academic basis, that there is a difference; that young women who choose, for whatever reasons, to go into sex work have a different sort of vulnerability, which might lead to more of them being trapped, compared with someone who might be trapped, as you put it, working in a call centre, as you did. I am just trying to get to the basis. Do you not see that these people are more vulnerable, potentially?

Dr Magnanti: Going back to the original questions that you asked Paris, the statistics do not show that sex workers are more likely to have drug abuse problems than their peer groups. No, the statistics do not show that sex workers are more likely to have a background of abuse or mental health problems than their peer groups. As Paris rightly mentioned, when we talk about the peer groups of people who go into sex work, these are people from ethnic minorities, people who are migrants and people who are LGBT. They have these conditions because of the stigma that is attached to them, so you are looking at a much wider cultural phenomenon than sex work itself and at people being driven into sex work as a function of being dispossessed in society as a whole.

So I do not agree with the way that you have set up the question, because I do not think that the statistics support that. I wrote a book several years ago that goes into great detail on this. I will leave behind a copy, which obviously you are welcome to peruse, because I'm sure you don't want me to go into that great detail now. The book is cross-referenced with all the relevant studies, so that you can read the original material for yourself and decide whether you feel that these studies are relevant sources for your inquiry.

Chair: Thank you. Are we done?

Tim Loughton: I think we have to be.

Q192 Chair: There are a number of initiatives which have been started. One of them was put forward by Detective Inspector Kevin Hyland, which we heard about in a previous evidence session. This would involve women from religious orders joining the police at the coalface, on the frontline, to assist the police in rescuing women who had been trafficked into prostitution. Cardinal Nichols, the Archbishop of Westminster, backed the scheme, and said that the presence of these nuns would encourage women to desist from being involved. What do you think?

Dr Magnanti: I'm of mixed Catholic and Jewish heritage. When I was 12 years old—which was years before I even had sex, and years before my first kiss—I was told by a nun that I was going to hell. I cannot imagine anything more offputting than the involvement of the Church, and specifically the Catholic Church.

Q193 Chair: So, no nuns needed?

Dr Magnanti: No nuns required. Look at the situation in Northern Ireland, for example. I know that Catholics are a minority in this country, but I think that there are enough people with a similar enough background of exposure to various offices of the Church that they would be extremely sceptical of any so-called help that it might offer.

Chair: Can I thank both witnesses for coming in? The Committee has listened very carefully to your evidence, Paris Lees and Dr Magnanti. It is very helpful to us in our inquiry. We haven't completed the inquiry, and we are taking evidence from other witnesses. We will certainly look at the suggestions that you have made, because we want the broadest possible number of people to come before us. This is simply because after we have completed our inquiry Parliament probably will not look at this again for many years.

For as long as the Select Committee system has been in operation, we have not looked at prostitution. That is why we are looking at it. I hope that what you have had to say will be of great help to the Committee. What I have heard today has certainly been very helpful. You will be very pleased, Paris Lees, that we have been joined by a woman member of the Committee, so we are no longer all male, as you said.

Paris Lees: Hello.

Nusrat Ghani: Hi, sorry I was late.

Chair: That hopefully will be of good use to you. Thank you both very much for coming. We really appreciate it.