

# The TUC voted against decriminalising sex work. Here's why it was the right decision

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***Delegates at TUC Congress stood against exploitation this week: full decriminalisation of sex work would only help the traffickers and pimps.***

On Wednesday, TUC Congress voted to uphold the policy of the TUC Women's Conference and to oppose the decriminalisation of sex work.

Delegates debated a motion calling for "full decriminalisation" of the trade; a demand that could include not only sex workers but also pimps, brothel owners and all those profiting from the exploitation of women and girls. I say 'girls' because half of women involved in sex work entered the industry before the age of 18.

The motion didn't focus entirely on women, and we must of course extend our concerns to all people exploited through the sale of sex. But the reality is that the overwhelming majority of those in the sex industry are women and girls. Men in the sex industry represent a very small minority and have very different pathways in and out of the industry.

'Full decriminalisation' is also known as the 'New Zealand Model' – a model which has been heavily criticised, including by women who have worked as prostitutes there. In March delegates at the TUC Women's Conference heard compelling evidence from experts in the field of violence against women who had spent time in New Zealand and seen first-hand the lack of protection afforded to women in the sex industry.

Those who support the New Zealand model argue that criminalising buyers of sex drives prostitutes underground and makes them less safe. Yet the Nordic model, which takes precisely this approach, has reduced street prostitution and trafficking. Importantly it also aims to [change social attitudes](#): it has recently been adopted in France, Northern Ireland, Canada, Norway, Iceland, and Lithuania.

It is sometimes asserted that those who work in the sex industry do so because of economic necessity rather than criminal coercion. This bears closer examination.

**Firstly, there is disturbing evidence about the level of coercion that actually exists. According to a recent [report](#) by London South Bank University, 50% of women involved in sex work reported coercion regarding their involvement.**

Furthermore, a 2016 [study](#) by the Police Foundation identified 65 brothels operating in Bristol over a two year period, and of these, over three quarters displayed links to organised crime groups.

Secondly, while it is certainly true that women are also driven into sex work out of desperation, drug addiction, and “economic necessity”, it does not follow that we should campaign for the decriminalisation of the pimps and brothel owners who profit from women’s poverty. Our response as trade unionists is to campaign to end the austerity, poverty and benefit sanctions that affect all vulnerable groups, and which may drive some women into the industry in order to feed their family.

Thirdly although all workers, including sex workers, deserve protection this does not mean that exchanging money for sex should be considered ‘work’ in the same way as any other job.

**We should ask ourselves what other jobs there are where extreme violence, sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy, and rape are commonplace workplace hazards. Violence against women is not acceptable in any setting.**

We know that current CPS guidance makes clear that it is not illegal to sell sex in a brothel. What Congress voted against is any move towards decriminalising exploitation by the pimps and gangs who control sex work.

***Sue Ferns is Deputy General Secretary of the Prospect trade union and Chair of Unions 21.***

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