



Ruhama, 25 Cork Street, Dublin 8
Telephone: +353 (1) 836 0292
www.ruhama.ie

Mr Gavin Shuker MP
Chair of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade
House of Commons
London SW1A 0AA
UK

Re: Ruhama's response to the Inquiry into 'pop-up' brothels

18th December 2017

Dear Mr Shuker,

Ruhama is a specialist NGO providing holistic support on a national basis in the Republic of Ireland to women affected by prostitution, including women who have been trafficked. We have been providing our services for almost 30 years, and have worked with 2,500+ women of over 60 nationalities. We currently support approximately 300 women per year – in 2016 304 women accessed our services, including 92 victims of sex trafficking.

We are pleased to respond to your call for evidence regarding the phenomenon of 'pop-up brothels'. While Ruhama operates solely in Ireland, we regularly support women from around the world who have been involved in prostitution in the jurisdictions of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. We also believe that some of the characteristics and trends we observe in the Irish sex trade are mirrored in the UK trade, and therefore we hope that the evidence we provide below proves useful to your important Inquiry.

1. What constitutes a 'pop-up brothel'?

1.1 We would define a 'pop-up brothel' broadly as any premises that is used flexibly and often at short notice as a location where sex is sold. Ireland's sex trade is primarily off-street and highly mobile with a significant degree of third party involvement (see point 2 below), and so a wide variety of premises, including apartments, hotel rooms and short-term holiday lets, are very regularly used by prostitution organisers as locations where sex buyers can go to pay for sex.

Organisers use these premises/locations whenever they require them and in response to local demand in the sex trade. Typically apartments are used as brothels for longer durations than hotel rooms or holiday lets, but the women selling sex from these apartments are constantly rotated to satisfy buyers' demands to purchase sex from a wide variety of different women.

1.2 For example, if there is a popular sporting or community event taking place in a particular locality that is likely to attract an influx of sex buyers, prostitution organisers will ensure that nearby apartments, hotels rooms and holiday lets are rented or booked in advance of this event to facilitate meeting the increase in demand. All of these locations act as 'pop-up brothels' purely in the sense that they may not be operating as brothels on a continuous basis, but can be arranged for this purpose at fairly short notice. Evidence from law enforcement (An Garda Síochána), reports from the women we support, and an analysis of patterns in the way prostitution is advertised online in Ireland all demonstrate the flexible and responsive nature of Ireland's sex trade, including the use of such 'pop-up' premises.

2. Who operates pop-up brothels?

2.1 In some cases, women in prostitution who are operating independently of third party control will organise their own 'tours' around Ireland to meet sex buyer demand in different locations, and in doing so will arrange in advance the premises from which they will sell sex. But in most cases these 'tours' are in fact organised by third parties – the sex trade in Ireland is overwhelmingly tightly controlled by a series of organised crime networks, both domestic and international. It is these networks/gangs that take charge of moving women around the country for the purposes of prostitution in order to maximise their own profits. Again this is evidenced by the experiences of law enforcement who investigate organised prostitution in Ireland, as well as reports from the women we support, many of whom describe being moved by organisers/pimps very regularly and in a highly planned fashion to a variety of locations around the country in order to sell sex.

2.2 The mobility and organised nature of Ireland's sex trade has also been captured effectively by investigative journalists – for example through an in-depth analysis of the workings of Escort Ireland (a website that controls the vast majority of prostitution advertising in Ireland) the RTE documentary *Profiting From Prostitution* (<https://www.rte.ie/news/player/2012/0207/3193909-prime-time-profiting-from-prostitution/>) exposes the orchestrated way in which women are moved by prostitution organisers to a range of premises around the country to satisfy sex buyers' demands.

3. What is the impact of a mobile sex trade?

3.1 Clearly 'pop-up brothels' are indicative of a very mobile, flexible and responsive sex trade. In Ireland this mobility brings advantages for sex buyers and organisers, but rarely for the women selling sex themselves. A mobile trade benefits buyers who are always looking for 'new girls' to purchase sex from. Mobility also offers greater anonymity and therefore impunity for buyers and organisers alike – premises operating as brothels for fleeting periods rather than on a

continuous basis are far less likely to attract the attention/concern of local residents or law enforcement.

3.2 However, being moved around within a mobile trade tends to be highly problematic for women in prostitution – it adds to the stresses and strains of selling sex and prevents them from ever ‘putting down roots’, gaining stability in their lives or building up a relationship with support services. In the case of vulnerable migrant women in the trade, including those who have been trafficked, the experience of being constantly on the move disorients them and very often prevents them from seeking help when they have no opportunity to become familiar with their surroundings or know who they can possibly trust or turn to for help.

4. Effective responses

4.1 ‘Pop-up brothels’ and similar have come into being because those who organise and profit from prostitution know their market well and are keen to meet paying customers’ (sex buyers’) demands. But the women selling sex rarely benefit from the mobile, transient nature of this trade. The most appropriate way to tackle the significant harms involved in the sex trade is undoubtedly to implement what is known as the ‘Nordic approach’ to prostitution, which decriminalises the seller whilst sanctioning the buyer, going some way to address the significant power differential between the two. After a number of years of evidence gathering, political deliberation and public debate we have now implemented legislation of this nature in Ireland (*The Criminal Law [Sexual Offences] Act, 2017*).

4.2 The above legal measures need to be accompanied by strong law enforcement actions against those who profit from prostitution. It is recommended that sanctions for exploiters should be brought in line with the size of the profits to be gained, and that this is of particular importance in the case of those who manage and organise prostitution on a large-scale and/or as part of a wider criminal gang/network. It is also vital to provide a range of supports (health, psychological, financial, educational, job-seeking etc.) to those women seeking to leave the sex trade to ensure that they have viable alternatives to prostitution.

We trust this brief information on the nature of Ireland’s sex trade and the recommendations arising from this provide useful additional evidence for your Inquiry. If you have any further queries regarding the evidence set out above, or our work on the ground in Ireland please do not hesitate to contact us. With many thanks for the opportunity to respond,

Yours sincerely,



Sarah Benson, CEO, Ruhama

Ruth Breslin, Policy & Communications Manager, Ruhama

Tel: +353 (1) 836 0292

Email: ruth@ruhama.ie