

Wednesday 8th April 2020

Dear Home Secretary,

We are writing as an organisation that provides specialist support to women involved in the UK sex industry. Many women involved in the UK sex industry experience multiple disadvantages. In the recent research commissioned by the Home Office (2019), the researchers stated that: 'a substantial proportion of individuals (mainly women and trans women) are selling sex to get by financially, given different constraints in their lives around caring responsibilities, physical and mental health, lack of access to social security benefits and support services, workplace discrimination, or other reasons. Their situation is compounded by stigma and managing safety, and many find that the longer they sell sex, the harder it can be to leave completely'. The current Coronavirus pandemic only heightens the vulnerability faced by those who are sexually exploited and those who sell sex*.

With the necessity of social distancing, and their lack of access to social security benefits, many women who sell sex are facing agonising decisions around how to secure resources to cover their basic needs such as housing, food and bills: decisions that involve risking their health/life and that of others. Over the last two weeks our street outreach team in East London have continued to meet women who feel they have no choice but to continue to try and sell sex.

In recent days there have been a number of initiatives calling for additional support for vulnerable women at this current time. We welcome these various initiatives, including that of Agenda and Sarah Champion MP, in raising awareness of the needs of women who find themselves additionally vulnerable at this time. We have also been greatly encouraged by the efforts of a number of organisations in setting up hardship funds for those involved in the UK sex industry who are in severe financial hardship. Whilst these are providing some much-needed immediate relief to those in dire need, such funds are inadequate in addressing the scale of vulnerability and need that the pandemic is generating amongst those who are sexually exploited.

In addition to the support called for in the letter to the Prime Minister, coordinated by Agenda, we are therefore calling on the Home Office to work to ensure:

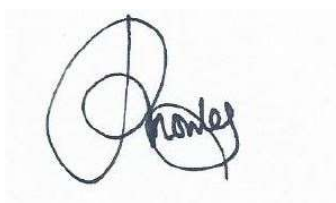
- Police forces across England and Wales do not take an enforcement approach at this time of crisis when encountering those who sell sex; instead, working with Local Authorities and specialist services to ensure additional support needs of those who are sexually exploited are identified and addressed.
- Additional emergency core funding is secured for specialist services that support women who are either the victims of sexual exploitation or who sell sex to ensure that they can continue to run and provide crucial support at this time of crisis

* We recognise that there are strongly held beliefs and positions regarding prostitution and the wider possible legislative models. At this time of additional vulnerability for women who sell sex for whatever reason, we would call for the current focus within the crisis to be on reducing vulnerability that women may face and ensuring adequate support is made available. We would also call for any proposals for legislative reform be paused during this crisis to avoid unnecessary resources being diverted away from those most at need.

- A pause on all benefit sanctions and conditionality. Resources must be made available to actively reach out to women unable to access benefits or engage with Job Centre Plus as a result of trauma.
- A commitment to future funding for specialist services that support women who are victims of sexual exploitation to ensure that services can continue to provide support once the pandemic is under control.

We are committed to providing support to those experiencing sexual exploitation at this time and into the future and are calling on the Home Office to demonstrate the commitment of this Government to also support those most vulnerable within our society at this time.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Josephine Knowles', is placed over a light grey rectangular background.

Josephine Knowles

Co-Director