

Summary of Lived Experience Interviews from The Women's Support Project November 2025

1. Overview

This briefing presents an integrated summary of oral and written evidence gathered from seven anonymised contributors - six women and one man - with lived experience of prostitution across Scotland, Ireland, and New Zealand. The purpose is to provide members with a trauma-informed understanding of the realities described by those who have lived within the sex trade and their views on the proposed Prostitution (Offences and Support) (Scotland) Bill. This summary was provided by the clerks of the Criminal Justice Committee, but every interview was conducted anonymously by the Women's Support Project.

The Bill seeks to:

- decriminalise people who sell sex;
- criminalise the purchase of sex in all settings; and
- require the Government to ensure exit and support pathways for those affected.

The testimonies analysed here reflect consistent support for those aims while stressing that implementation, safety, and sustained recovery supports will determine whether the Bill can deliver meaningful change. Contributors described prostitution not as an occupation freely chosen but as an adaptive response to circumstances such as poverty, trauma, gendered inequality, and, in some cases, coercion.

2. Approach and Participant Profile

Evidence was drawn from semi-structured interviews and written submissions conducted or received between October and November 2025.

Participants are cited as **A–G** for anonymity and grouped by circumstance:

Group	Description	Examples
Formerly involved / exited	Women who have left prostitution (Scotland, Ireland, New Zealand)	A-E
Currently involved	Woman currently in indoor/agency work	F
Male survivor	Man coerced through addiction and criminal control	G

A trauma-informed lens guided analysis: recognising harm, honouring autonomy, avoiding blame, and foregrounding safety and dignity. Interviewers offered participants control over disclosure and withdrawal, and evidence has been presented in non-judgemental language.

3. Pathways into Prostitution

Across all interviews, entry into prostitution stemmed from vulnerability rather than volition. Common entry routes included childhood abuse, homelessness, financial deprivation, addiction, and grooming by partners or acquaintances.

Several women entered as teenagers, describing manipulation framed as affection or opportunity. A male survivor recalled being “kept high so that I’d do what they wanted” and eventually forced to sell sex to pay for drugs supplied by the same people.

Participants emphasised that once involved, leaving became progressively harder due to dependency, trauma bonding, fear, and stigma. Economic precarity - especially single parenthood - kept many returning. No contributor described their entry as a free or informed adult choice. Instead, prostitution was framed as survival behaviour in the absence of safe alternatives.

4. Experiences and Conditions within Prostitution

4.1 Physical and Psychological Harm

All participants reported physical or sexual violence, ranging from assault and intimidation to rape. Violence was described as normalised and frequently unreported.

The cumulative effect was long-term trauma, hyper-vigilance, and symptoms consistent with complex PTSD. Women spoke of dissociation during sex acts, intrusive memories, and enduring shame. Several said conventional therapy failed because practitioners minimised or reframed prostitution as empowerment.

4.2 Indoor vs Street Settings

Evidence challenges the assumption that indoor prostitution is safer. Participants with experience in both contexts stated that danger simply becomes less visible.

Several recalled being told to lie to police or clients about their autonomy, and to deny any coercion if questioned. Constant relocation of flats prevented community support and kept women isolated.

4.3 Economic Exploitation

Earnings were unstable and heavily controlled by managers or third parties. Women described paying inflated rents, “house fees,” or losing half their income to agencies. Some noted that online platforms and apps function as digital pimps, taking cuts while disclaiming responsibility. A participant from New Zealand - where brothels operate legally - said this model didn’t make women safer, it just made “pimps” respectable businessmen.

4.4 Health and Addiction

Substance use was prevalent as a coping mechanism. Several entered the trade already dependent on drugs or alcohol; others became dependent during it. Health

consequences included untreated injuries, infections, sleep deprivation, and chronic anxiety.

5. Criminalisation of People Selling Sex

All participants opposed laws that criminalise people selling sex, citing them as barriers to safety, justice, and recovery.

5.1 Impact of Criminal Records

Women who had been charged with soliciting or brothel-keeping said convictions created enduring obstacles to employment, housing, and education.

They supported the Bill's proposal to overturn existing convictions and prevent future prosecutions. Decriminalisation of sellers was viewed as essential for rebuilding lives and for enabling cooperation with police when reporting abuse.

5.2 Fear of Authorities

Several women avoided contact with police due to prior negative experiences - raids, public shaming, or disbelief. A current indoor worker said she was instructed by managers to smile and tell police that she "liked it here" if police come. Another described being warned that reporting violence would lead to deportation of foreign colleagues. The resulting mistrust kept women in unsafe environments according to testimony.

5.3 Need for Privacy and Confidentiality

Participants requested lifelong anonymity protections, particularly for survivors whose cases attract media attention. They emphasised that exposure could trigger re-traumatisation, loss of family contact, and renewed stigma.

5.4 Stigma and Internalised Shame

Women spoke about the corrosive effect of social stigma. Some internalised guilt for what had been done to them. A trauma-informed reading recognises this as a response to chronic powerlessness rather than true self-blame. Many said that removing criminal status would signal that society acknowledges them as victims of exploitation, not offenders.

6. Buyer Accountability and Demand Reduction

Every participant supported the principle that responsibility for prostitution must rest with those who create the demand. The consensus was clear: criminalising buyers is the central moral and practical shift that distinguishes the Nordic Model from older legislation.

Women framed buyer criminalisation as an act of societal boundary-setting - a public statement that purchasing another person's body is unacceptable. Several also believed it would deter at least a proportion of buyers, describing deterrence as "a necessary fear."

6.1 Consistency Across Settings

All stressed that the offence must apply indoors as well as on the street. A split system - illegal in public, legal behind doors - was described as hypocritical and unsafe.

6.2 Economic and Behavioural Effects

A few participants anticipated a short-term drop in income, viewing it as an acceptable trade-off for increased safety and the broader changes they hoped for, primarily through exiting prostitution. Some expressed hope that demand reduction would prevent new generations of women from being drawn in.

6.3 Male Accountability and Culture

Several women contrasted exploitative buyers with men who protect and respect women, suggesting that law can reinforce positive norms. One person emphasised that men who are genuinely strong and protective don't treat women as objects. Another highlighted that true masculinity is characterised by compassion and respect, rather than a sense of entitlement.

7. Implementation, Policing, and Enforcement

Participants repeatedly cautioned that legislation alone cannot deliver change without consistent enforcement and trauma-informed policing.

7.1 Learning from International Experience

A woman who had worked in Ireland under the Nordic Model reflected that while the law appeared effective in theory, it ultimately failed due to a lack of enforcement. She reported continuing to see the same clients, noting that nothing really changed because there was no oversight.

In contrast, a former worker from New Zealand described her experience under full decriminalisation, where issues like violence and exploitation still occurred. Her view was that regardless of whether the system is legal or illegal, harm continues when authorities fail to intervene.

7.2 Specialist Training and Dedicated Units

All contributors endorsed the creation of trained, specialist police teams. They urged that officers receive education from survivors to understand indicators of coercion, trafficking, and trauma.

Participants argued that enforcement should target exploiters and buyers rather than women. Re-traumatising interactions, such as aggressive questioning or moral judgement, were highlighted as major deterrents to seeking help.

7.3 Balancing Safety and Prosecution

Women warned that over-zealous policing could unintentionally endanger them by making buyers act hastily or forcing women to move to unfamiliar areas. They advocated for confidential reporting systems, text lines, trusted liaison officers, and community outreach, so women can alert police without fear.

8. Support and Exit Pathways

All participants emphasised that exiting prostitution requires sustained, practical, and emotional support - not one-off interventions.

8.1 Nature of Needed Support

Common priorities included:

- Safe, affordable housing;
- Accessible addiction and mental-health services;
- Childcare and family reunification help;
- Education, training, and employment assistance;
- Peer or survivor-led counselling.

Several women expressed concern about programmes that take a controlling or moralising approach, warning that such efforts can be counterproductive. One noted that when others try to take over decision-making in the name of rescue, it often leads to negative outcomes. Across their accounts, autonomy and consent were consistently identified as essential elements of trauma-informed support.

8.2 Appropriate Service Design

Participants stressed that services must be non-religious, non-judgemental, and explicitly tailored for people with prostitution experience. A recurring concern was that mainstream addiction or counselling groups often failed to understand their realities.

They emphasised that counselling alone is not enough, specialised therapeutic support delivered by trained professionals is essential. Survivor-led organisations were viewed as the most effective in meeting these needs. The male participant also noted that gender-inclusive support remains limited.

8.3 Long-Term Commitment

Participants described the process of leaving the sex trade as one that unfolds over several years and depends heavily on stable, trusting relationships. They criticised short-term initiatives that often end abruptly when funding runs out, leaving women without continued support. One woman pointed out that recovery and healing can't be confined to the limits of a single financial year.

9. Stigma, Trauma, and Recovery

9.1 Enduring Psychological Impact

Every testimony described long-term emotional effects: flashbacks, depression, anxiety, dissociation, and difficulty forming relationships. Participants said prostitution reshaped their sense of identity.

A trauma-informed reading of the evidence shows widespread complex trauma, arising from repeated boundary violations and loss of agency. Traditional clinical

approaches were often unhelpful or retraumatising because practitioners lacked understanding.

9.2 Stigma and Social Isolation

Participants described how social stigma intensified their trauma, with many recounting experiences of being judged as immoral or blamed for their circumstances. One woman noted that people often assumed she had chosen her situation and therefore must have welcomed it. This stigma extended into critical areas of life, including healthcare, employment, and parenting. One participant shared that after revealing her past to a doctor, she was treated as though she were contaminated. To support dignity and successful reintegration, participants stressed the importance of expunging criminal records and improving professional understanding.

9.3 Peer and Community Support

Some participants found solace in survivor networks that foster mutual understanding. Shared language - such as describing themselves as “prostituted women” rather than “sex workers” - was empowering because it located responsibility in systems, not individuals.

10. Cultural and Social Reflections

Participants broadened their reflections beyond personal experience to critique cultural norms and media narratives. They voiced alarm at the glamorisation of prostitution and pornography and the way social media normalises “selling images” as empowerment.

They connected this cultural shift with rising tolerance for sexual commodification and a weakening of empathy. One mother said she feared her daughter would grow up thinking it is normal.

Participants argued that education and prevention programmes should promote respect, consent, and equality, rather than framing prostitution as work. They viewed public awareness as integral to demand reduction.

11. Overall Summary and Analysis

Across all seven testimonies, the evidence conveys a coherent message: prostitution is experienced as harm, not work. It is driven by poverty, inequality, addiction, coercion, and social neglect. Violence and exploitation occur in all settings, including regulated indoor environments. Criminalising women deepens that harm; decriminalising them while criminalising buyers is widely viewed as the fairest and safest balance.

Participants see the Bill as an opportunity for Scotland to acknowledge prostitution as a form of gendered violence and to realign law and services with that understanding. They stress that the Bill's success will depend on three conditions:

1. Effective enforcement focused on buyers and profiteers;

2. Comprehensive, survivor-led support for those exiting; and
3. Cultural change that dismantles stigma and demand.

Annexe A – Individual Evidence Summaries (Grouped by Experience Type)

Group 1: Formerly Involved / Exited Participants (A–E)

This group comprises five women with lived experience in various contexts, including Scotland, Ireland, and New Zealand. All have exited prostitution and now advocate for reform. Their accounts offer consistent themes of coercion, trauma, and the limits of existing legal frameworks.

Background and Entry

Entry commonly occurred before full adulthood, through relationships or survival circumstances. Several described being groomed by partners or acquaintances who exploited financial hardship or emotional vulnerability.

Economic necessity was a recurring driver. Women entered prostitution following eviction, domestic abuse, or addiction. One participant from New Zealand recounted volunteering for the country's decriminalised sector in her teens, initially believing it would improve safety.

Experience Within Prostitution

All women described continuous exposure to harm - verbal abuse, physical assaults, and sexual violence - across both street and indoor environments.

Financial exploitation was universal. Agency and brothel owners imposed heavy deductions; online intermediaries profited from women's images without oversight. The perception that "indoor equals safe" was rejected; participants argued that violence and coercion persist but become less visible.

Criminalisation and Police Relations

Several had experienced arrest or cautions for soliciting or brothel-related offences. All said criminalisation created lifelong barriers to employment and housing, reinforcing stigma and dependence.

Fear of police was widespread, though some recounted positive encounters with trauma-informed officers later in their lives. The consensus was that trust can be rebuilt only if women are fully decriminalised and protected from prosecution.

Views on the Bill

Each participant supported the Bill's central aims:

- Decriminalise people selling sex to remove fear and stigma.
- Criminalise buyers in all contexts to shift accountability.
- Guarantee support pathways to exit.

The group saw the Bill as a “course correction” that acknowledges structural inequality rather than personal failure. Women emphasised the importance of enforcement - warning that good law without action leaves victims unprotected.

Support and Exit

Most had exited prostitution after sustained intervention: detox programmes, housing support, or mentoring by survivor-led organisations. They described recovery as long-term and non-linear.

Support considered effective was trauma-informed, choice-based, and continuous. Harmful support included religious or “rescue” programmes that imposed morality or control. Participants stressed that any new framework must fund survivor-designed services.

After-Effects and Perspective

All reported chronic trauma symptoms (flashbacks, anxiety, relationship difficulties and enduring stigma). Several said they rarely disclose their past due to discrimination in work and healthcare. They viewed the Bill as symbolic recognition that prostitution constitutes violence, not employment.

Group 2: Current Participant (F)

This participant remains involved in indoor prostitution within Scotland. Her testimony provides an immediate view of current conditions and practical implications of the proposed reforms.

Context and Motivation

She entered prostitution as a young adult to meet financial obligations after job loss. She described initial relief at short-term income, which quickly gave way to fear and disillusionment.

Dependence on online platforms and intermediaries exposed her to constant surveillance and emotional manipulation. While she operates indoors, she stated that safety is mostly an illusion - clients know her location, while she has little control over theirs.

Experience of Violence and Control

Incidents of verbal abuse, coercion, and physical intimidation were frequent. She reported that reporting to police feels unsafe due to the risk of being publicly identified or losing income.

Drugs and alcohol were used intermittently to cope with anxiety. She recognised patterns of dissociation – “switching off” during encounters - as a survival response.

Views on the Bill

The participant supports the Bill but worries about transitional effects:

- She acknowledged that criminalising buyers might lead to a drop in income in the short term, but felt it was a worthwhile compromise if it meant men would stop treating women as possessions.
- Decriminalising sellers and overturning convictions were viewed as crucial to building trust with authorities.
- She urged that enforcement focus on “predators”, not women.

Support and Needs

She identified housing stability, mental-health care, and income support as prerequisites to exit. She also called for peer mentoring from women who have left prostitution:

This testimony highlights that without immediate alternatives- financial and emotional -many women remain trapped even when they wish to leave.

Group 3: Male Survivor (G)

This participant’s account offers a rare perspective on male victimisation within prostitution, intersecting with addiction and organised crime.

Background

He was drawn into prostitution through drug dependency and coercion by dealers involved in “county lines” operations. His home was “cuckooed” and used as a base by traffickers.

Experience and Harm

He described being forced to sell sex to men and women to repay debts for drugs he never requested. Violence and humiliation were routine. He attempted self-harm multiple times before being assisted by police and outreach workers.

The participant highlighted the lack of gender-inclusive services: most charities focused solely on women, leaving male victims isolated.

Recovery and Support

He eventually received therapy and addiction treatment through statutory and voluntary agencies, including an Independent Sexual Violence Advocate and trauma-focused CBT. He praised certain services that offered dignity and consistency, contrasting them with others that were perfunctory or judgemental.

Views on the Bill

He supports the Nordic Model’s gender-neutral framing - making it illegal for any person to buy sex. He argued that this would prevent exploitation across genders and signal that trafficking, and coercion are recognised as crimes of power, not desire.

He also urged the Committee to ensure benefit systems and mental-health services are accessible to people exiting prostitution, as bureaucracy often pushes survivors back into dependency.

Cross-Group Observations

Across all three groups, testimonies converge on key points:

1. Prostitution is consistently experienced as exploitation and trauma, regardless of gender or setting.
2. Economic vulnerability and coercion are the main drivers of entry.
3. Criminalisation of sellers compounds harm; decriminalisation is essential for safety and reintegration.
4. Buyer criminalisation is widely supported as the clearest mechanism to reduce demand and shift moral accountability.
5. Support services must be long-term, trauma-informed, and survivor-led.
6. Stigma and shame remain major barriers to recovery and must be addressed through public education and confidentiality safeguards.