



Gender Equality and Sexual Consent in the Context of Commercial Sexual Exploitation

A study by the Sexual Exploitation Research Programme UCD, in collaboration with the National Women's Council

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UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy
Research, Analysis, Evidence

About SERP

The Sexual Exploitation Research Programme (SERP) was established in 2017 by Emeritus Associate Professor Ursula Barry in the School of Social Policy, Social Work and Social Justice at University College Dublin. SERP is now led by Associate Professor Dr Marie Keenan. In 2020, SERP joined UCD's Geary Institute for Public Policy.

SERP conducts independent feminist research on all forms of commercial sexual exploitation that creates useful knowledge for law and policy makers, practitioners, survivors, supporters and activists. SERP aims to strengthen the evidence base for current and emerging issues of sexual exploitation in Ireland, and beyond. Our work is designed to enhance understanding of the commercial sex trade, its impact on women and girls who are sexually exploited, on communities and on society at large.

In addition to strong links with international partners and allies, SERP also works collaboratively with support services for victims and survivors of prostitution and sex trafficking on the ground, seeking to bridge the gap between academia and frontline practice in generating new knowledge, insights and solutions on these issues.



About NWC

The National Women's Council is the leading national representative organisation for women and women's groups in Ireland, founded in 1973. We have over 190 member groups and a large and growing community of individual supporters.

The ambition of the National Women's Council is an Ireland where every woman enjoys true equality and no woman is left behind. This ambition shapes and informs our work, and, with our living values, how we work. We are a movement-building organisation rooted in our membership, working on the whole island of Ireland. We are also part of the international movement to protect and advance women's and girls' rights. Our purpose is to lead action for the achievement of women's and girls' equality through mobilising, influencing, and building solidarity.

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Context

Building a society so that women can live free from violence and harassment is at the core of achieving equality for women in Ireland and globally. Sexual exploitation, harassment and violence are a cause and consequence of gender discrimination and must be located within a gender equality framework. The current sex trade is heavily gendered, and migrant women make up an average of 84% of women in prostitution across 13 European countries.¹ In Ireland, the profile of women in the sex trade (estimated to be 1,000 women at any one time) is of young, vulnerable migrants from the Global South and impoverished regions of Central and Eastern Europe.² In the vast majority of cases the buyer is male, well-educated, with a medium to high income,³ whereas women find themselves in prostitution as a result of being trafficked, coerced, compelled by extreme poverty, or lack of other means of financial survival. Legalised regimes in Europe have resulted in an exponential growth in demand, with an estimated 400,000 women and girls in the German sex trade, with evidence of worsening conditions and severe exploitation that has profound consequences for women's physical, sexual, reproductive and mental health.⁴ However, despite this evidence, there is growing pressure, particularly on young women, to understand prostitution within the framework of the neo-liberal concepts of individual agency, choice and autonomy and as a legitimate form of work which can be safely regulated in the market economy as with any other commercial transaction.

Alongside these different perspectives on prostitution, the rise of #MeToo and other international and national movements has ignited a broad and varied discussion about the nature of sexual consent in Ireland. What distinguishes the #MeToo movement is the widespread recognition that sexual coercion includes instances where a person's vulnerability is used against them in order to satisfy the sexual desires of another.⁵ Prostitution, while central to this discussion on consent, is often absent from it, and when ignored may produce a distorted view of the commercial sex trade as a process that is positively consented to by individuals, when in reality this is better understood as acquiescing to unwanted sexual acts for payment. Recent polling of the public in Ireland revealed that a majority see a connection between paying for sex, coercion and diminished consent, with 62% agreeing that people in prostitution who have no alternative income do not have the same power of consent as other people. In the same poll, 65% agree that buying sex from people who have no alternative income is a form of sexual violence.⁶

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- 1 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), 2010. *The Globalisation of Crime: A Transnational Organised Crime Threat Assessment* Vienna: UNODC.
 - 2 Kelleher Associates, O'Connor M., and Pillinger, J., 2009. *Globalisation, Sex Trafficking and Prostitution: The Experiences of Migrant Women in Ireland*, Dublin: Immigrant Council of Ireland; O'Connor, M., and Breslin, R., 2020. *Shifting the Burden of Criminality: An Analysis of the Irish Sex Trade in the Context of Prostitution Law Reform*. Dublin: SERP. <https://www.ucd.ie/geary/newsevents/news/text,523382,en.html>
 - 3 Yonkova, N., and Keegan, E., 2014. *Tackling Demand for Sexual Services of Trafficked Women and Girls*. Dublin: Immigrant Council of Ireland, Stop Traffick! EU Project.
 - 4 Walby et al., 2016. *Study on the Gender Dimension of Trafficking in Human Beings*. Luxemburg, European Commission, Migration and Home Affairs; Breslin, R., Latham, L., and O'Connor, M., 2021. *Confronting the Harm: Documenting the Prostitution Experiences and Impacts on Health and Wellbeing of Women Accessing the Health Service Executive Women's Health Service*. Dublin: SERP. <https://www.ucd.ie/geary/newsevents/news/text,597027,en.html>
 - 5 Farley, M., 2018. '#MeToo Must Include Prostitution.' *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 9. <https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2018.03.01.09>
 - 6 Language, 2020. Survey by *Opinions Market Research*, n=873 nationally representative sample.

Aims

Funded by the Irish Research Council *New Foundations* Grant Scheme, this project is a collaborative initiative between civil society and academia. It brought together Ireland's largest representative organisation for women, the National Women's Council (NWC), and the SERP research team in University College Dublin, to explore commercial sexual exploitation, with a view to building evidence to strengthen the advocacy goals of NWC and its members on this critical issue.⁷

Specifically, the study aimed to develop a theoretical framework on prostitution with NWC which is compatible with their goal of achieving gender equality, respects individual choice and sexual autonomy, and also recognises how individuals are constrained in their choices by structural, socio-economic and cultural forces. In consultation with NWC members and directly informed by their views and experiences, this study aimed to develop a critical understanding of consent within the prostitution contract and whether the buying of sexual access to some women's bodies undermines the movement for meaningful sexual consent for all. A key question explored with members is the impact that framing prostitution as a positive choice may have on marginalised women who are disproportionately represented throughout the global commercial sex trade.

Methods and approach

Data were gathered primarily via a series of consultative Roundtable events, to which all members of NWC were invited. These events were co-designed and co-delivered by the Sexual Exploitation Research Programme (SERP) research team in direct collaboration with NWC staff with expertise on the issue of commercial sexual exploitation, including a sex trade survivor advocate.

Stage 1 of the project involved preparation for the Roundtable events, including the development of an approach that would create an open and discursive forum in which NWC members could freely share their views. Stage 2 involved holding three Roundtable events with members, each of which were recorded and professionally transcribed for the purposes of analysis. In Stage 3 data were analysed thematically and key findings collated and presented to NWC. Stage 4 involved the production of this report, which NWC will use to inform their work on prostitution, and on commercial sexual exploitation more broadly, with their members, policy makers and the wider public. It should be noted that some adjustments were required during the course of the project to both its approach and timing, as a direct result of the global Covid-19 pandemic.⁸

7 With regard to these advocacy goals, NWC states that there are: 'important societal impacts [of the sex trade] that cannot be ignored. This will require society to make the connection to the vulnerabilities, violence, sexism, lack of consent and gender inequality inherent in the commercial sex trade and to recognise prostitution as a form of gender-based violence and a violation of human rights. We aim to support people in making those connections because without them the goal of true gender equality will never be attained.' Source: National Women's Council, 2021. *No Woman Left Behind: National Women's Council Annual Report 2021*. Dublin: NWC. https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_Annual_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf

8 The Roundtable events were originally designed to be conducted in-person in an environment that would promote constructive discussion and debate. On this basis, they were postponed on a number of occasions during mid-2021, whilst the research team awaited the anticipated lifting of public health restrictions. In Autumn 2021, NWC management informed the research team that it had taken the decision not to hold any further in-person events, including member events, for the remainder of 2021. At this stage an extension to the project's timescales was sought from the Irish Research Council and agreed accordingly. Some minor adjustments were then made to the Roundtable programme so that these events could be conducted online.

Three Roundtables were undertaken with NWC members in early 2022 via Zoom. The planned discursive forum that the research team had always intended to create was facilitated with the help of an experienced Chair, dedicated note-takers and the use of Zoom breakout rooms to promote more focused discussions, with key points then shared with the whole group. The research team is confident that despite the virtual nature of the Roundtables, discussion flowed quite freely, participants seemed comfortable in asking questions and sharing their own valuable insights; and as such these events yielded high quality qualitative data for analysis.

On NWC's advice, invitations to members were initially targeted to reflect members' areas of expertise. As such, Roundtable 1 was comprised primarily of representatives of organisations providing advocacy and support services for women experiencing domestic and sexual violence. Roundtable 2 was comprised primarily of representatives of organisations providing advocacy and support services for migrant and minority ethnic communities in Ireland. All other NWC members were invited to Roundtable 3, which was attended by representatives from the wider NWC membership and included those operating in the follow sectors: women's rights, health, trade unions, academia, education, politics, LGBT advocacy & support and homelessness & addiction services. All NWC members were invited to the Roundtables, regardless of their particular area of expertise, their previous knowledge of the issue of prostitution, or their position in this regard.

In total, 24 individuals representing 22 NWC member organisations attended the Roundtables. This represents approximately one third of NWC's most actively engaged member organisations. Almost two thirds of NWC members who participated in the Roundtables have women with experiences of the sex trade within their service user group, while a smaller number provide specialist/dedicated supports in this regard. In addition to the survivor advocate from NWC, two further member participants shared that they had had personal experiences of involvement in the sex trade.

It must be borne in mind that a clear limitation of this study relates to its representativeness – the findings cannot be deemed to be representative of all NWC members, only of those who accepted the open invitation to participate – one third of NWC's most active members, as noted above.

The Roundtables

The Roundtables lasted 2.5 hours each and were recorded via Zoom for the purposes of transcription. Discursive in nature, each Roundtable was arranged around four statements that were based on the project's original areas of inquiry, as follows:

1. **'Prostitution helps to lift women out of poverty'**
2. **'Prostitution is gender-based violence'**
3. **'Sexual consent is something that can be bought'**
4. **'The sex trade has an impact on gender equality'.**

These statements were co-designed by the research team and the survivor advocate to test participants' knowledge and understanding of the issues at hand, and to promote further discussion, debate and enquiry. Participants were advised that these sessions provided an opportunity for NWC members to explore their views in a safe forum, where frank discussion was encouraged.

Following a short introduction to the project delivered by the SERP researcher, Roundtable participants were invited to freely discuss the above statements in small subgroups (via Zoom breakout rooms), with no leading, prompting or any other interventions from the research team. To this end, the lead researcher from SERP and the survivor advocate from NWC who were leading the Roundtable sessions, did not attend the breakout room discussions, to ensure that their presence did not influence these discussions in any way. Participants were asked to share with each other whether and why they agreed or disagreed with these statements, and to discuss any further thoughts or ideas that they evoked. Equal time was allotted for discussions in each breakout room, with participants themselves determining how much time they spent focusing on each statement. One representative from each subgroup then fed back to all Roundtable attendees in the main Zoom meeting room and a wider discussion on the issues raised ensued. The breakout room discussions were central to data collection as they facilitated a clear demonstration of participants' current knowledge and understanding of the issues encapsulated by the above statements and elicited their unprompted views and thoughts on same.

Following a short break, participants were presented with a range of Irish and international research evidence that relates to the above statements by the SERP researcher, complemented by evidence from lived experience shared by the partner from NWC, a sex trade survivor and advocate. This was followed by a wider questions and answers session and group discussion, in which participants reflected on the evidence they had been presented with, and whether and how this altered or consolidated their earlier views. All ensuing discussions were captured for the purposes of analysis before final feedback was sought from participants and the session was closed.

As noted above, the Roundtables were professionally transcribed, and the data analysed thematically. Key findings are presented below. The focus of this report is participants' initial, unprompted responses to the four statements outlined above as these proved the most informative, rich and revealing of participants' knowledge and views on the issues

at hand.⁹ It is therefore important to note that the findings presented in this report are drawn from the initial discussions among participants in the Zoom breakout rooms and the main room prior to the presentation of evidence from research and lived experience. Thus, the analysis is based on participants' free, open and unprompted responses to the four statements outlined above. All verbatim quotes from participants featured in this report derive from the breakout rooms or the main room prior to any interventions made by the research team, unless otherwise stated.

Findings

Participants knowledge on issues of commercial sexual exploitation varied widely. Some had personal experience of the sex trade or professional expertise in delivering support services to women with these experiences. Others had more limited knowledge. But in general, this did not prevent those who attended the Roundtables from participating enthusiastically in the discussions, sharing their views, proposing solutions and demonstrating a keen desire to listen to each other and also to learn. What did unite all participants, as NWC members, was their commitment to social justice and to advocating for the rights of those who experience discrimination or marginalisation in Irish society, which is clearly very pertinent to all of the issues the Roundtables explored in relation to prostitution and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation.

There was clear evidence amongst participants of a strong understanding of the vulnerabilities and marginalisation so often experienced by women who are drawn into prostitution and trafficking – including those relating to the migrant experience in Ireland, insecure immigration status, poverty, domestic violence, addiction and homelessness, amongst others. A number of participants linked this understanding to the core principle of NWC's strategy for achieving true equality for women in Ireland – 'No Woman Left Behind'¹⁰ – and emphasised how this work must include women affected by prostitution and other forms of commercial sexual exploitation.

Key findings are presented below arising from the research team's thematic analysis of all qualitative data gathered across the three Roundtables, presented according to the four key statements that were discussed and explored in each. It is notable that there was a very striking degree of consensus among NWC members on all four of these statements. As previously noted, these findings are reflective of the initial, open discussions that participants had when first presented with these statements. For all verbatim quotes presented here that formed part of these discussions, participants are identified according to their core professional role and the Roundtable they attended.

9 Analysis of the briefer whole-group discussions that took place after the presentation of Irish and international research evidence and evidence from lived experience of sexual exploitation, suggests that participants found that their unprompted views in relation to the four discussion statements were confirmed by the evidence presented. Participants further reported leaving the Roundtables with enhanced knowledge and understanding of what this evidence demonstrates.

10 National Women's Council, 2021. *No Woman Left Behind: National Women's Council Annual Report 2021*. Dublin: NWC. https://www.nwci.ie/images/uploads/NWC_Annual_Report_2021_FINAL.pdf

‘Prostitution helps to lift women out of poverty’

There was strong disagreement with this statement from all participants. Whilst some acknowledged that entering the sex trade might provide a ‘temporary fix’ for women in dire financial circumstances by giving them access to cash quickly, in the long-term it is an unlikely escape route from poverty. Participants argued that while the sex trade may provide a woman with money, it can take many things away from her at the same time – such as her physical and mental health, her relationships with family and friends and sometimes even how she values herself. In this respect, there was a strong understanding amongst participants of how prostitution entraps and often further impoverishes women, robbing them of many other life opportunities in the long term. This was described by some participants as the ‘poverty of self’ – the ways in which prostitution creates a wider deprivation within women’s lives beyond a simple lack of money to sustain themselves.

“I don’t think it really like helps [women] get out of poverty. Instead, it pushes them into more poverty levels and at the same time leaves them with lifetime consequences as well, which are both physical and psychological.” (A migrant rights advocate, Roundtable 2)

“And what we also know is that the longer that somebody is in prostitution, the mental health and physical health consequences actually take a very heavy toll...So while their peers move on and perhaps access education and other life opportunities and start building career opportunities, for that entire duration...comparative to their peers they have less education, therefore less opportunities. They also are dealing in many, many cases with things like post-traumatic stress disorder...” (A GBV service provider,¹¹ Roundtable 1)

“So, the idea that there’s an economic empowerment component as a benefit to prostitution is a fallacy. That there’s an economic motivation to be involved in prostitution is the truth, but I think...we need to find better options for women if they’re in those circumstances, if they’re... right at a knife’s edge in terms of poverty, in terms of marginalisation, in terms of an abusive partner or having been groomed. You know, this [prostitution] isn’t a solution.” (A GBV service provider, Roundtable 1)

A number of participants argued that society’s acceptance of neo-liberalism and focus on individual choices has fuelled the normalisation of the sex trade. Some questioned whether

¹¹ In this context, ‘GBV service providers’ are service providers providing supports to women experiencing domestic, sexual or other forms of gender-based violence (GBV).

prostitution could ever be a genuine choice for a woman when it is the only alternative she has to provide for herself and her family. On this basis they challenged the notion of ‘choice’ – noting that many are advocating for women’s right to ‘choose’ prostitution who would never be in a position to have to make this same ‘choice’ themselves.

“Yeah, I obviously agree with everyone’s right to choose. And we would have some clients that would say they choose it [prostitution]. But then again it comes back to the ethics of consent. And when they have so many other things going on and other vulnerabilities, if they had other options or if some of those vulnerabilities were taken away, if they weren’t in addiction, if they had a stable home, if they had a stable income, would they still choose it?” (A homeless service provider, Roundtable 3)

“...when we talk about young people – there’s a misconception when young people come out to say, ‘oh, sex work, it’s their right, you know, it’s their agency, and it’s their choice.’ For me, I feel oftentimes it’s that ignorance about what goes on within prostitution, you know? Because the people that come from the perspective of ‘sex work’, they package it very well, that it’s almost as if you want to take away young people’s fundamental human rights [to sell sex]. And that is one thing young people will never stand for, you taking away their rights. But they don’t go into looking at the harm that is involved in the sex trade...or whether you’ve been trafficked...The harm, the trauma she goes through is all lost in the [sex work] narrative.” (A migrant support provider, Roundtable 2)

A number of participants stated that they had quite a strong visceral reaction to the very idea that prostitution can be a solution to women’s poverty when it was first presented to them in the Roundtable setting – in the sense that they felt immediate disagreement and a strong need to dispute it.

Arising from the theme of poverty, a further subtheme emerged from the data relating to the view that prostitution should be treated as ‘a job like any other’. It was noted that it is a relatively small, but very vocal proportion of those with lived experience of the sex trade who promote this view, silencing the majority who experience prostitution primarily as exploitative.

“...I think we should also be in a position to define prostitution. Are we saying that prostitution is a job?...Because when you talk about something lifting you out of poverty, it’s something that is meaningful... you’re taking it as a job that is going to sustain you and that is actually going to lift you completely out of poverty...but [with prostitution] it’s still leaving you in some poverty in terms of mental and physical well-being.” (A migrant rights advocate, Roundtable 2)

“...it’s less than one percent of people we are talking about, the very privileged one that chose that life [prostitution]. But unfortunately, it’s that one percent we often hear their voice more than the ninety-something

percent that...are still there because of one form of economic deprivation or the other.” (A migrant support provider, Roundtable 2)

Participants wished to challenge this view of prostitution as regular work because of the extent to which they believe the sex trade sexually commodifies women, and women’s bodies in particular. Participants highlighted the need for greater attention to be paid to the reasons women enter prostitution in the first place, alongside greater awareness of the true realities of the sex trade and of selling sex.

“I suppose it’s all that notion of objectification of women [in the sex trade], you know. Women...they are not seen as human beings, but more as a product...what the sex trade does is that. It takes away the humanity in women and, you know, presents them as that object that can be paid for, that can be bought.” (A migrant support provider, Roundtable 2)

“And also like, looking at it from human right lenses, it’s what happens within that prostitution business. You know, it’s somebody buying the body of another...I think it’s [up to] the society to look into what is acceptable and what is not acceptable. So, if women are not able to find jobs that help them to be treated with dignity and respect, that the society take that responsibility to explore how to be able to meet the needs of the women. Because in prostitution there’s exploitation, there’s abuse, and there’s everything that goes with it.” (A migrant rights advocate, Roundtable 2)

‘Prostitution is gender-based violence’

There was firm agreement amongst participants that prostitution is a form of gender-based violence (GBV), given the highly gendered nature of the sex trade and the acknowledged power imbalance that typically exists between the seller and the buyer. In this context, of number of participants highlighted that the number and nature of the acts involved in prostitution are experienced as traumatic by many women, causing harm to their physical, sexual and psychological health, with long-term consequences. Others noted that desperate circumstances such as poverty drive women to take risks they never normally would, within a trade that is rife with violence.

Participants discussed whether sexual liberation for women and the sexual exploitation of women and LGBT young people had somehow been conflated or blurred by a selective focus on people ‘choosing’ to enter the sex trade. Divisions within feminism – prostitution as exploitation versus prostitution as work – were seen as highly problematic in this context, preventing solutions from being identified.

“Yeah, that’s a challenge we have, because...if one side of feminist [feminism] is seeing it as a job, another are seeing it as a form of GBV, then it’s become problematic. We really need to be able to define and give

fact[s]...look at the impact of prostitution itself on individual women and in particular women who have come up to speak...about the experiences of being in prostitution.” (A migrant rights advocate, Roundtable 2)

“Yeah, I am going to admit I was one of those feminists who basically glorified the notion...that you’ve stated [selling sex as a form of sexual liberation]. Because what I used to think was that sex work was just a really powerful thing...like have sex with whoever, and whatever you want, and all that...I was more of like pro [choosing to sell sex] without even thinking [of] the critical side of it and how it’s like in sort of a grey area...I do feel like it’s being glorified and advertised amongst young people, like amongst TikTok, even video games as well. Because these feminist posts [online] that basically...are basically glorifying it [prostitution] rather than talking about like, you know, the issues behind it.” (A women’s rights advocate, Roundtable 2)

One participant argued that in her experience young people often accept that prostitution is exploitative, but are uncomfortable describing it as GBV *pe se*, especially when they are so often presented with arguments around individual choice and personal empowerment.

A number of participants suggested that work in this area should be directly linked to advancing the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 5 and also SDG10¹² – given the that the vast majority of women in prostitution in Ireland are migrant women, alongside the extent to which women of colour are disproportionately exploited within the sex trade at a global level.

“So, I think it all needs to go back to the society, you know, at society level. We cannot leave it just to the people who do this, who trade and traffic us and all that, and people who are involved at the border. It’s a societal thing. What values do we have as a society, at the national levels within our own government, but generally globally? And this puts us back to all the instruments that we have, for example, the SDGs...especially Goal Number 5 and Goal Number 10. Goal Number 5, clearly, you know, defines issues of SGBV [sexual and gender-based violence] as such. But the Goal Number 10 also shows the inequality within countries and outside countries. So, we should also be able to look about issues of them. You know, what leads women [from more impoverished nations] to go to prostitution?” (A migrant rights advocate, Roundtable 2)

A range of participants argued that more needs to be done to define and highlight prostitution as GBV, focusing directly on the harms, and that this would provide young women, in particular, with a clearer understanding of the realities involved. It was also noted that survivor voices have an essential role to play in promoting the understanding of prostitution as GBV and highlighting the harmful realities of the sex trade as a whole – this was described in one group as showing

12 See United Nations *Sustainable Development Goals*: Goal 5 (Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls) and Goal 10 (Reduce inequality within and among countries). Available at: <https://sdgs.un.org/goals> (Last retrieved 07/09/22).

the human face of prostitution and of those who had once been so dehumanised by it. Once again there was a consensus that what really happens inside the sex trade needs to be spoken about more openly to create a wider understanding of the harm and exploitation, but also of the exploiters involved.

“...I feel that most of the time the people that are coming from the perspective of it [prostitution] is gender-based violence, we are not vocal enough, we don't put it out there enough, we don't campaign as aggressively as the other side [who promote 'sex work'] – that is the reality. Because the other side sell it as if you want to take away their human rights [to sell sex]...It's still a lot of harm. And I think it's those harms that need to be highlighted on more for young people to really understand...It's not about taking away your choice. But it's about what is really [happening] within the sex trade when you go in there. And it's only people that have been there that can really come out to be vocal...it's only, you know, when the voice of survivors themselves become really loud. I mean, nobody can argue with the voice of the survivor to say this is what it is. Nobody can come and argue that, you know. And that is what is not out there [survivor voices], I think.” (A migrant support provider, Roundtable 2)

In exploring prostitution as a form of gender-based violence, a number of participants were keen to highlight the role of the sex buyer in this context and the power imbalance that so often exists between men who buy sex and women who sell it in a gender unequal society.

“...there's that balance of power between two people. And they need to be able to explore that more and see how this should not be acceptable. Because it goes then to...the whole area of gender and gender-based violence. And that's how it starts, you know. It starts even from that aspect of the power relations that we have the buyer and we have the person who is providing. It's like selling a commodity. So, is sex a commodity? You know, is selling sex, a commodity that you're selling out of somebody's life?” (A migrant rights advocate, Roundtable 2)

“This is about power relations between genders...like very often we focus on the victims of the whole process, that we're not saying probably strongly enough about men in this whole process, you know?...We should focus more...A similar story probably when we're talking about gender-based violence in general. We usually victimise women, that we're not saying enough about perpetrators...we focus on the victims but we're not saying how actually we have many man ready to pay for sex...[from] women and trans people and so on.” (A minority ethnic support service provider, Roundtable 2)

Finally, participants highlighted the need for concrete prevention work in this context, including with boys and young men on what healthy and respectful relationships should look like, but also at a wider societal level, so that true prevention of GBV is not just about passing the existing risk

on to other women and girls, but stopping GBV including prostitution, and the phenomena that cause and promote it, in their tracks.

“You know, that seems obvious that we should be teaching our young men...and all our young people – we should be treating each other with respect and to have a conscience about each other as human beings and what that looks like and not necessarily having to fit into gender-stereotypical roles.” (A minority ethnic support service provider, Roundtable 2)

“I think a lot of time the easy thing for society or government or education to do is to concentrate on telling young girls or women how to be safe, but they miss the bit about working with males around what healthy relationships look like, you know, how do you treat people with respect. That is the bit that never happens. It almost is teach the women to be safe rather than teach the men to not be a danger, you know!” (A minority ethnic support service provider, Roundtable 2)

‘Sexual consent is something that can be bought’

There was strong disagreement with this statement from all participants. Participants discussed the extent to which the payment of money for sexual access to another person’s body undermines or even bypasses consent, particularly when one understands the difference in power and status that typically exists between the buyer and the seller. In this sense, the act of purchasing sex was seen by some participants as using money to deny women their bodily autonomy. For women in desperate financial circumstances, the use of money to sexually access their bodies was also described as a form of manipulation.

“Yeah, I was just saying from a feminist perspective, the idea that you could use money or make consent transactional completely undermines every single aspect of the women’s movement’s assertion that women have a right to bodily autonomy, women have a right not to be coerced into sex in the context of domestic violence or not to be groped in a nightclub. And if you can suddenly lay down money and say, ‘But I’m paying you,’ it completely pulls the rug. And so, it’s simply untenable if we commit to the broader principles of combating those invasive, abusive behaviours by men against women and girls in all other aspects of our lives, to say that in certain circumstances he’s actually got a right because you’re paid cash. So, I suppose that was me just in terms of my feminism. It [the idea that true consent can be bought] is completely incompatible.” (A GBV service provider, Roundtable 1)

“So, my take on that is that money [in prostitution] can be sometimes used as a form of manipulation...because I think consent...it’s very personal. Like it’s not something that they can take advantage of. It’s basically kind of like buying a human being, you know. That’s my take on it.” (A women’s rights advocate, Roundtable 2)

“Well, I would think anything that money comes into like that, you’d be buying or bought, it removes an element of consent anyway...you can be free to make your decisions about things, but the circumstances, you know, so like poverty...the whole thing of bartering or money coming into it does remove the element of your true consent...the buyer and the seller, there has to be a certain equality between them, which is obviously not if you’re selling [sexual access]...So, you’re immediately not equal, put it as boldly as that. You’re less than not equal.” (An academic, Roundtable 3)

Others noted that great efforts are being made to prevent women from experiencing unwanted sexual intrusions on their bodies, and that payment should not simply permit or excuse this behaviour. One participant highlighted how payment means that the buyer can dictate all the terms of that sexual ‘transaction’, whilst the seller has no power or control over her own body in this context. Participants also noted that, given the gendered nature of sexual exploitation, the idea that sexual consent is something that can be paid for directly undermines efforts to achieve gender equality.

“But actually, the reality is in a sexual transaction where one person is buying access to the other, the person who dictates what happens to the woman’s body is the buyer. So, it’s not like a mutual experience of sexuality and pleasure, it is being dictated. So, therefore that’s not actually bodily autonomy. Again, it’s bypassing in order to be able to do what you want with somebody’s body, and my feminism just doesn’t accept that as compatible!” (A GBV service provider, Roundtable 1)

“...and obviously the transaction of money is used to kind of take the guilt away from the person who’s giving the money...So, it’s not consent in the way that you’d want it to be.” (A minority ethnic support service provider, Roundtable 2)

“...we are constantly talking about consent. We talk about it in terms of reproductive rights, in terms of bodily autonomy, in terms of choice, in terms of ‘you’re not allowed to touch me’, consent, consent, consent. And if you put money into the transaction, you know, effectively you are trying to buy consent. And when you have somebody who’s in a precarious situation where they are economically desperate, or whether they’re under third party control, or whatever those circumstances are, that is a really unequal power dynamic. And I’m strongly of the view that it undermines all of our efforts in terms of the women’s movement to say that in certain circumstances you can avoid the question of consent with money.” (A GBV service provider, Roundtable 1)

This same participant went on to highlight the persistence of harm that women can experience in prostitution:

“...consent does not obviate harm. So just because something was consented to doesn't mean that it isn't harmful and damaging.” (A GBV service provider, Roundtable 1)

Participants called for the teaching of meaningful consent to children from primary school upwards, including to tackle the distorted or inaccurate notions of consent portrayed in pornography. It was also noted that consent has different meanings in different cultural contexts, so a culturally sensitive approach should be adopted to developing a broader and clearer shared understanding of sexual consent. It was suggested that emphasising the need to ensure true sexual consent in all contexts cannot merely focus on checklists and red flags – this work must also take account of and tackle head on the sexual, racial, economic and other structural inequalities that are inherent to a patriarchal society, and which undermine the achievement of true consent in the first place.

“One of the things that I think it's very important why you should do it [teach about consent] at an early stage is the fact that, you know, we deal with a lot of migrant families. Most of us are coming from cultures where it is a highly patriarchal culture. The man has the say and the woman is not meant to say anything. But it's one thing for us to come from different countries where...the man has the final say. But when our kids that have been born here, they start from the understanding that...‘This shouldn't be happening.’...maybe by the time the child gets to secondary school, that child is in a position to challenge [that].” (A migrant support provider, Roundtable 2)

“So, like we've discussed that consent is taught in universities, but it's better to be taught in the likes of early stages and schools. And to educate young people about consent, especially young boys, because it always starts with young boys, because like prostitution and gender violence is not a women's problem, it's like a men's problem, because...the patriarchal system basically upholds like male privilege, as we all know.” (A women's rights advocate, Roundtable 2)

“Coming from a young person's perspective, I just recently got out of secondary school and that culture of female objectification always starts... in schools...Take a look at porn, for example. A lot of videos – well, nearly 99% of them – are aimed for the male target [audience] and there's these porn titles like...‘daughter’ or ‘daddy’ kind of thing, like sexualising young girls...Like particularly sex education, it's not informing...young people about consent at all. It's just focusing on like reproduction and all of that...consent should be taught at a young age.” (A women's rights advocate, Roundtable 2)

One participant argued that when it comes to issues of sexual consent and our attempts to tackle and prevent gender-based violence, we need to reframe our approach and avoid basing our strategies on an ideal of equality that is incredibly rare in a patriarchal society.

“I think we make a mistake when we talk about consent in terms of equal relationships...and that might sound contradictory, what I mean by that is that equality is incredibly rare between two people, it’s a freak, we’re always unequal with the person with us. And actually what is required around equality is that we understand our power, we understand our privilege, we understand our situation vis-à-vis that other person in that moment in time and we are ethical and reflective on our power in that... When we construct a prevention strategy on the basis of an ideal that barely ever exists, and is an accident when it does, then we put aside one of our most important tools, which is talking about inequality...we have disarmed ourselves against the ‘choice’ and ‘empowerment’ narrative [in relation to prostitution] if we set up an ideal of equality.” (A GBV service provider, Roundtable 3)¹³

Finally, it is worth noting that whilst participants gave considered responses to this statement, they gave noticeably less discussion time and depth overall to it in comparison with the three other statements, perhaps suggesting that this is an area NWC members may find useful to further reflect on and have the opportunity to unpick in a more focused way.

‘The sex trade has an impact on gender equality’

There was firm agreement with this statement. Participants argued that the sex trade, a gendered phenomenon, has a significant, negative impact on the achievement of gender equality because of the ways in which it commodifies women, and vulnerable women in particular. It was suggested that the sex trade, including pornography, actively promotes the view of women as products or assets and cements a sense of male entitlement to sexually access women’s bodies. In this regard, participants argued that sexual exploitation should never be viewed as a ‘women’s problem’ alone – the negative impacts of the sex trade are felt right across society.

“You know, the vast majority [in prostitution] are women providing sex for men...of course there’s exceptions...but that is the vast majority. And then because that’s the vast majority, that reaffirms a societal notion that women are some sort of sexual object...that [notion then] pervades in all of society.” (A minority ethnic support service provider, Roundtable 2)

¹³ This contribution was shared by the participant in the discussions that followed after the presentation of Irish and international research evidence and evidence from lived experience of sexual exploitation.

“[the] sex trade has an impact on gender equality, we all had an agreement on this. We basically discussed that chauvinistic culture of male toxicity and like misogyny. So, the sex trade is mainly – the vast majority are women. It takes away the humanity from women and it creates this culture of objectifying women, making them an object. And we also discussed it in terms of porn that basically feeds into this culture.”

(A women’s rights advocate, Roundtable 2)

Participants highlighted the struggle of trying to achieve gender equality when a trade exists that so effectively dehumanises women in the eyes of some men. Some noted that, as history has shown, when someone is dehumanised, it can become easier to harm them and the repercussions may be less severe.

“I suppose it’s all that notion of objectification of women. Women – they are not seen [by sex buyers] as human beings, but more as a product... So there’s no way that gender equality [can be achieved in this context]... And the reality is that once you see something as an object...as opposed to another human being...what the sex trade does is that. It takes away the humanity in women and presents them as that object that can be paid for, that can be bought. And there is no way a man will see...an object as being equal to him, a man.” (A migrant support provider, Roundtable 2)

“And what we’re seeing is it’s nearly becoming normalised, you know, especially amongst younger men, that the buying of sex is...a commodity and it’s okay. So certainly, what is that saying about the equality? Because...there’s no equality where you’re buying or you have power over someone else...where they’re not equal or where the alternative of saying ‘no’ is more harmful to that person or they believe it to be more harmful. Like, there’s absolutely no equality in that. There’s no equality because the woman is left choosing between two horrific scenarios and which one is better for them. But there’s no equality. There’s no true consent in that.” (A homeless service provider, Roundtable 3)

Participants also drew attention to the intersection of gender, age and racial discrimination and inequality that is so often perpetuated within the sex trade, where women of colour are disproportionately represented.

“I think it definitely does impact gender equality. It feeds still into the view of women in certain populations or cultures of being lesser.” (A homeless service provider, Roundtable 3)

“...with the porn industry promoting these so-called fetishes, that feeds into this culture of sexualising people, especially sexualising women, especially sexualising young women. Like feeding into that culture of

rape, basically. So, porn...I would consider it to be like the big asset of... the sex trade industry.” (A women’s rights advocate, Roundtable 3)

“...especially women of colour, because there’s this culture of hyper-sexualisation of [women of colour]...being depicted as seductive and all that, like completely sexualising women of colour. And especially the bodies of women of colour...which also would feed into racism as well.”
(A women’s rights advocate, Roundtable 3)

Participants highlighted the fact that, whilst no one has the ‘right’ to sexually access another person’s body, some believe that an entitlement to sex exists – for example that people with disabilities should be entitled to purchase sex. They recommended that this view needs to be addressed by highlighting the human right of every person not to be sexually exploited.

A small number of participants also referred to the stigma often associated with being in prostitution and queried whether legislative and other responses to this issue increase this stigma, particularly amongst groups already experiencing societal stigma for other reasons, such as their gender identity. Ultimately it was acknowledged that it is possible to condemn a system – such as the system of prostitution – without condemning, judging or stigmatising those people that are trapped within it. There was widespread agreement that this approach needs to be communicated more clearly, alongside the message that gender equality can never truly be achieved without tackling and nature and existence of the global sex trade.

“...States should take this as a form of gender-based violence and look at it from the perspective of inequality and power [im]balances and addressing gender equality in particular, because this is something that [we] have not been able to achieve. You know, we should go through education starting it from all levels...with children, with the youth, with everybody, to understand...But also [to state] what do we want? What norms, values, principles do we have as a society, as nations, as global citizens, that we continue to allow this kind of trade to go on, people being traded for sexual exploitation?” (A migrant rights advocate, Roundtable 2)

Conclusions

This project has succeeded in enhancing NWC's understanding of its own members' knowledge and views on issues of commercial sexual exploitation. The Roundtables delivered in collaboration with the SERP research team provided a dedicated opportunity for NWC members to explore their views in a safe forum where frank discussion was encouraged. Through this process, members were able to examine what they know, learn from the evidence provided, unpack some of the myths they are aware of and tackle some of the thornier aspects often associated with the issue of prostitution. Members reported leaving the Roundtables feeling better informed. Some also reported that being able to have these conversations in a constructive way with other members as their peers was extremely helpful, not only for their own learning, but also for the development of their own analysis. It was also acknowledged that the active collaboration between NWC's survivor advocate and the SERP research team added real value to the process and enhanced the outcomes for those involved.

The Roundtables held as part of this study confirmed that there is an overwhelming endorsement amongst NWC members of NWC's long-held position on prostitution as a form of gender-based violence most commonly impacting vulnerable or marginalised women,¹⁴ a position now formally recognised in Ireland at the national policy level.¹⁵ This is key to NWC's policy development in this area going forward, and will inform how NWC addresses sexual exploitation in its wider advocacy work around GBV, but also in its work on the issue of sexual consent specifically. It is of significant interest to find that there was no equivocation amongst the NWC members who participated in this project in terms of their understanding that prostitution cannot involve meaningful sexual consent – again this points the way for future advocacy work.

In terms of NWC's stated wider goal of achieving true equality for women in Ireland,¹⁶ this study has demonstrated that members' view the very existence of the highly gendered sex trade as detrimental to this goal. In exploring this, members revealed their nuanced understanding of how factors such as race, immigration status, poverty and lack of other resources or opportunities intersect to seriously constrain women's choices and decisions in this regard. On this basis, it is clear that the fight for a gender equal society, in which 'no woman is left behind', must include measures to tackle the power and reach of the sex trade in Ireland and beyond.

It is intended that the evidence presented here will be used to help shape and inform NWC's wider advocacy and campaigning work to achieve gender equality. It is recommended that with regard to commercial sexual exploitation, this work is undertaken not just among their own members, but as part of NWC's contribution to the wider public narrative on tackling sexual exploitation to achieve a gender equal Ireland.

14 National Women's Council, 2021, *op cit*.

15 Prostitution and human trafficking for sexual exploitation are recognised as forms of gender-based in the Government of Ireland's *Zero Tolerance: Third National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-Based Violence, 2022-2026*: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a43a9-third-national-strategy-on-domestic-sexual-and-gender-based-violence/>

16 National Women's Council, 2021, *op cit*.

