

A response to Mary Honeyball

by Vicky Wong and Natasha Clark / 04 July 2012

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Mary Honeyball, Labour's Spokesperson on the European Parliament's Women's Rights and Gender Equality Committee, has been a vocal supporter of anti-sex work legislation and has written a report to the European Parliament recommending the Swedish Model, which criminalises the purchase of sex. She recently wrote an article published in Total Politics on the issue and has appeared regularly commenting on the issue on a variety of BBC platforms including Daily Politics, Women's Hour and the Sunday Politics which could be edited together to produce a montage of discredited studies and misleadingly quoted statistics which have no basis in reality.

Here are a few examples:

- Sunday Politics, 13/10/13: "Statistics tell us that out of brothels and women who are prostituted in London over 90% of them actually have been trafficked."

Women's Hour, 4/12/13: "The overwhelming majority of women working in prostitution, prostituted women, have been trafficked."

On the Daily Politics, 13/12/2013: "Some statistics say as much as 90% of those women who work in prostitution, who are prostituted have actually been trafficked."

No, they don't. Estimating the numbers of sex workers in Britain with any degree of accuracy is problematic but the figure that academics in this field work with at present is around 80,000.

Statistics relating to victim referrals to the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) referenced in Human Trafficking: The Government's Strategy (2011) recorded 932 adult victims of trafficking in 2010/11, 438 of whom were classified under sexual exploitation; however, given the illegal and hidden nature of trafficking the figures are likely to be higher than those formally reported.

The ACPO report, *Setting the Record*, The trafficking of migrant women in the England and Wales off-street prostitution sector (August 2010) found that of their estimate of 30,000 women in off-street prostitution, around 2,600 were trafficked. If we use the figures quoted in the *Setting the Record* report then it is less than 8.7% of off-street female sex workers that are trafficked which obviously doesn't account for street based sex workers and those who aren't female so the percentage of all sex workers will be lower.

Nicola Mai, Professor of Sociology and Migration Studies at London Metropolitan University, in a recent article, *Only a minority of UK sex workers have been trafficked* (www.theconversation.com), said, "The moral panic on the supposed prevalence of trafficking in the global sex industry rests on a lie: that the majority of sex workers are trafficked. In fact, the opposite is true."

On the Sunday Politics Ms Honeyball was told by London Assembly Member Andrew Boff, who

has published well-respected, well-researched and evidenced reports on both sex work and trafficking, that her claims are simply not true. She was told the same on Women's Hour by academic Belinda Brooks-Gordon who is widely published on the subject.

- In her Total Politics blog, Honeyball says the Swedish model “has halved prostitution in Sweden”.

Any claims that street prostitution decreased in Sweden cannot possibly be reliable. It is inevitable that by criminalising an act the number of people who are willing to admit to partaking in it will decrease. The more stigmatised sex work is, the less likely sex workers are to engage with police and health services. Though the expected dip in the numbers of visible street sex workers occurred initially, according to the Swedish National Board of Health and Welfare, by 2007 "about two thirds of street prostitution [was] back."

According to Rose Alliance, a sex worker led organisation in Sweden, there is no evidence at all that the indoor sex markets are slowing down and, if anything, more people are entering the industry. This is corroborated by academic studies which challenge the claims of success made by supporters of the Swedish approach. In addition, reports from sex workers and those working on the front line with sex workers confirm that, as expected, a drop in custom has resulted in lower prices charged, less choice in clients and clients pressing for quicker, more risky transactions, all of which increases the levels of risk and danger. The Swedish Model has resulted in classic displacement of sex workers and put more sex workers at risk of harm and violence.

- In the Total Politics blog Honeyball claimed: “Much of the opposition to the Swedish Model comes from men who want to maintain the status quo”.

The Swedish Model is opposed by the vast majority of sex workers, academics in this field and those who provide frontline healthcare and support services to sex workers in the UK. Females would make up the majority in each of these categories.

- In the Total Politics blog she also refers to “a study finding that 49% of British men have travelled abroad for sex.”

Follow the link in the article on the Total Politics website to learn more about this study by Melissa Farley (whose work has been widely discredited), Julie Bindel and Jacqueline M. Golding.

The clue is in the sample as you can see from the description: “A sample of 103 men in London, England, who used trafficked and non-trafficked women in prostitution were asked about their experiences and awareness of the sex industry.” So, when she said “49% of men” she actually meant “49% of men in London who already admit to “using” trafficked and non-trafficked women in prostitution based on a small sample of 103.

The language used by Mary Honeyball and some of the other people advocating the Swedish model based on an ideological objection to sex work, set within a particular radical feminist framework, is extremely offensive and, at times, discriminatory. It dehumanises sex workers, denies their agency and further entrenches stigma and, as we know from the tragic murder of Petite Jasmine in Sweden, stigma can be fatal. This was expressed by Jasmine's mother who said of the Swedish authorities: "I know who held the knife, but they might as well have put it in his hands."

These issues are emotive and politicians will argue that they need to use language which may offend some people to get their point across and advocate for the changes they want to see. However, what is not tolerable is the blatant and casual misrepresenting of facts and evidence to manipulate people into supporting a specific viewpoint. This is shameful and politicians should know better.

Alex Bryce, Manager, National Ugly Mugs Scheme (NUM) Rosie Campbell OBE, Chief Executive, Genesis and Chair, NUM Advisory Group. Dr. Mary Laing, Lecturer in Criminology, Northumbria University. Jane Pitcher, Board Academic Representative, UK Network of Sex Work Projects. Shelly Stoops, Operational Manager, SAFE Place Merseyside, Liverpool Community Health NHS Trust.