

The trouble with criminalising sex workers' clients

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The all-party parliamentary group that recommended the criminalisation of sex workers' clients, which is cited as backing for Caroline Spelman's views (Outlaw buying sex, says former Tory minister, 22 April), is a partisan group whose original remit was to "tackle demand for the sex trade". Its moralistic stance is confirmed by its choice of secretariat – the Christian charity Care. When the cross-party group reported in early March, it did not release evidence to show how many of the 413 respondents supported the main recommendation. Considering that more than half thought that prostitution was a legitimate form of work, it is unlikely this was a majority. It should now cough up the figures.

Ms Spelman glosses over sex workers' concerns about how criminalisation of clients would undermine safety. sex worker from the Rose Alliance, Sweden, where the law was changed in 1999, spoke recently to a 200-strong parliamentary meeting about the increase in stigma and danger: "We are still criminalised if we work together in premises, we risk eviction by landlords, condemnation by social workers and even losing custody of our kids because we are seen as 'bad girls' unwilling to change. This law should be abolished, not exported to other countries."

Tackling the appalling 6.7% conviction rate for reported rape would be a more effective way of addressing high levels of violence against sex workers. New Zealand decriminalised in 2003 with verifiable improvements in sex workers' safety. Contrary to claims by Joan Smith and others, this is very different to Germany's state-run legalised prostitution and deserves serious examination.

Niki Adams *English Collective of Prostitutes*

- If you offer things for sale, you are obviously seeking purchasers; so if Caroline Spelman and others had their way, the bizarre outcome would be sex workers doing nothing illegal in enticing would-be purchasers to act illegally. Further, presumably payments being outlawed would not be restricted solely to cash; so any two people on a romantic date had better ensure they pay for their own food and drink, to avoid any misunderstandings.

ome sex workers are oppressed, suffer appalling conditions and would much prefer different occupations. Those features, of course, have applied to many other jobs. The solution has been legislation to improve standards of health, safety and benefits etc, not to make heavy manual work, tedious factory work and street cleaning, for example, all illegal. **Peter Cave** *London*

- So supply-side economics is finally coming to the sex trade. Given its utter failure everywhere else, Caroline Spelman indeed can perhaps hope that it will knock the sex trade on the head.

David Redshaw *Gravesend, Kent*