



**Harm was done:
prostitution, politics and power
in the run up to the 2012 London Olympics**

Staff of frontline services describe their experiences.

The International Union of Sex Workers
17 December 2012
International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers

The red umbrella is the symbol of the international sex workers' rights movement. Red for our strength and our pride, it represents both the literal shelter from the rain needed when working on the street, and a symbolic protection from the prejudice, discrimination and abuse still endured by sex workers everywhere – which we resist, together.

17 December is International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers. This annual event was created by sex workers as a way to speak out against those who would silence us, whether by direct violence, the violence of the state, which criminalises us when we work together (any building used by more than one sex worker can be raided as a brothel), or those who would rather speak for or about us than listen to us.

This day has been marked by sex workers to commemorate the harms done to our community since 2003, in reaction to the comments of the “Green River Killer” who murdered at least 71 women. He said: “I picked prostitutes as victims because they were easy to pick up without being noticed. I knew they would not be reported missing right away and might never be reported missing ... I thought I could kill as many of them as I wanted without getting caught.”

A community's worth is measured by the way it treats the most vulnerable. It is time for London to treat people who sell sexual services with respect and to prioritise our rights and safety.

The International Union of Sex Workers:
For our human, civil and labour rights. For our inclusion and decriminalisation.
For freedom to choose and respect for those choices, including the absolute right to say no.
For the full protection of the law.
For everyone in the sex industry.
ONLY RIGHTS WILL STOP THE WRONGS.

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Introduction

In early 2010, a London-wide “Network on Human Trafficking in Relation to the 2012 London Olympic Games” began meeting. These meetings were administered first by the Equalities and Human Rights Commission, and then by the Greater London Authority.

The first meeting the IUSW attended, in March 2010, had approximately fifty attendees. We had not been invited, hearing about it through word of mouth, and feared we might be turned away at the door - this has been the case at some meetings where prostitution policy was being discussed.

The event was chaired by Gunilla Ekberg who stated, as if it were the opinion of the entire group, “we see prostitution as violence against women” and continued to outline plans that there would be a focus on prostitution and trafficking for sexual exploitation and that demand for sexual services would be tackled through law and through publicity. There would be two sub-groups, chaired by representatives of pre-selected NGOs; one would focus on prostitution and trafficking, one on forced labour in other areas.

The prostitution and trafficking sub-group met over the next two years, and many meetings were attended by staff of frontline projects that deliver services to sex workers. The process seemed to be run by the NGO chairing the meetings, which campaigns for “prostitution to be seen as violence against women”, and by, first, staff of the EHRC and then by GLA staff, not by elected GLA members.

This short document, produced for International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers 2012, records the experience of some of those projects who attempted to participate in this policy making process. It consists of interviews with staff from seven services that, between them, offer support to thousands of sex workers - UK born and migrant, female, male and trans – right across London.

The material is presented anonymously so respondents could speak freely. Some work for charities, some within statutory services provided by the NHS. Many thanks to all those who took part or in other ways supported this project.

The questions asked were

- Did you see increase in prostitution or trafficking in the run up to the Olympics?
- Did your funding or other resources you had available increase / stay the same / decrease in the run up to the Olympics?
- Were you involved in policy making in the run up to the Olympics, and, if so, did you feel heard?
- Did policy making reflect the needs of your service users?
- Did policy making reflect the evidence base (the research produced by academics, government bodies or other NGOs) around prostitution and trafficking?
- Did you see increased enforcement or increased services (from other support projects) for people in the sex industry in the run up to the Olympics?
- Did what you saw on the ground reflect the policy making decisions you were aware of?
- Is there anything else you'd like to add?

The text that follows is an unedited agreed record of the conversations with service providers, carried out in December 2012. Without exception, they describe a process in which their knowledge was ignored and people in the sex industry harmed and endangered by the ill-informed policy and practice in the run up to the London 2012 Olympics.

Did you see increase in prostitution or trafficking in the run up to the Olympics?

No.

No increase and, if anything, a drop in the numbers of women sex working in our area. Women in flats said there was a marked decrease in punters to the point that some women were thinking of taking the time off for the Olympics and coming back in September 2012.

No.

No. We did weeks of intensive outreach over the Olympics period ... what we saw was no increase, but some women we hadn't seen in a long, long time. That was economic, the number of women who've had their benefits cut – and where do you think they're going to find jobs? If there was an increase in the numbers we were seeing, it was because we were doing outreach on days of the week that we'd never done before and we saw different women on those days. But we did really conscientious data collection but they were all from local borough and working on the same streets [as the established "beat"]. Women had moved from working onstreet to indoors – this was partly because of police activity, fear of the police, but also if they had more stable drug habits they could manage keeping hold of a phone and organise an indoor place to work.

No. We didn't see an influx of any of our alarm bell groups – people who are at particular risk of coercion, exploitation, or trafficking; we didn't see any increase in prostitution or trafficking. And the way the sex industry is constructed, people [in the sex industry] won't put in a lot of effort, investment, for an event that only lasts a couple of weeks.

No. We did additional outreach over the Olympic period but we didn't see any more people than we usually do.

No. Quite the opposite – fewer women selling sex. The numbers of trafficked women we see have always been very low – 5 a year, maybe a few more. And we saw fewer women in the two years in the run up to the Olympics due to all the brothel closures – the concerted effort to try and push prostitution out.

We saw no evidence of trafficking – there's one undocumented woman, she's from Africa, waiting on a place in a hostel. If you've got no paperwork, this [sex work] is one of the things you can do for money. And if women have got no money coming in, the Home Office is providing no money for these women, and their children are going hungry, that's what they'll do; women will provide for their children.

Did your funding or other resources you had available increase / stay the same / decrease in the run up to the Olympics?

Stayed the same, but we had more a bit more freedom of how to spend it so we were able to offer more support to migrants, get more translation services.

We were just about ok – we got a tiny amount of money from the local authority for the intensive outreach, and then our van [used for outreach to women selling sex onstreet] broke down and took almost all of that money. They didn't pay us for the regular outreach we do, but for the extra intensive outreach we did over the Olympic period. We worked with local sexual health services to offer more support.

Stayed the same.

In the lead up period – a few years before the Olympics – we experienced substantial cuts to our service, due to general public sector cuts taking place. There was no recognition at a funding level that we might need more money if this fabled increase in trafficking and prostitution increased. Some funders talked about funding work just on trafficking or just on exiting, from some quarters we were pressured to focus work purely on exiting rather than on what women want for themselves. We've always supported women to exit prostitution if they wish, though we always begin the process through the implementation of harm reduction measures so that it's possible for the sex worker to take a broad look from a place of stability and see what options are available.

Stayed the same.

No funding increase.

*It got a bit worse for a while, but it's died down now. I tried to get money for work on drugs issues and sexual health in one Olympic borough, but they weren't prepared to fund it. So **all this panic and hype, but no money for services!** I think the Olympics policy in almost all areas had far more impact on women working offstreet rather than onstreet.*

We lost some funding and we were actually closed for a lot of the Olympics. We still did outreach work, but everything else was really disrupted. We were having to do more work to see the same people due to all the enforcement.

Were you involved in policy making in the run up to the Olympics, and, if so, did you feel heard?

*We were involved in the strategy for the borough, but generally **it felt like the decisions had already been made**. Plus it was seen as part of an umbrella issue, and sex work is not like other issues, it should stand alone. That way it is addressed properly, and if there are other areas of women's services that women in prostitution need to access then they should be able to do that.*

*How can I answer this? What was expected from us at those endless meetings at the GLA? I thought I was asked to attend in order to contribute something about the experience of frontline services, but that wasn't the case. Even though one was participating in the meetings and giving an opinion based on years of experience, I didn't see that reflected in any way in policy decisions. **It felt as if the agenda was already set**, they were just ticking the boxes, it didn't seem that anything I or my colleagues brought up at any of those meetings was heard at all, was reflected in the minutes or taken forward in any way in policy development. So as the meetings went on, I just dropped out of attending – our service is really busy, always short of time and resources, and **going to these meetings seemed like a complete waste of time**. I didn't feel heard at all in the bigger meetings, in the smaller meetings it felt like it was very difficult for myself or colleagues from frontline services, who generally share a broad consensus of opinion about what our service users need – anything we said was stuck on the back burner and never re-visited. Meetings were structured to have a very specific agenda and nothing was allowed to intrude on that agenda.*

One local authority took a very common sense approach, listened to what we said about the women we were working with. Other areas had their own agenda of brothel closures and weren't really interested in listening to us about what service users need.

The whole focus was only on women – no awareness that men and trans people also sell sex, and when you raised that, it was completely dismissed. To get men mentioned at all, you had to really push.

We weren't involved in any of the London wide policy making discussions.

*We were to a small extent, but I don't believe we were heard – **if they'd listened to us, they wouldn't have done what they did**, they wouldn't have closed all those premises.*

*I took part in the London wide process – **there was no interest in listening to organisations that were working at the frontline.** At times we were told that would change, but it never actually happened. It was **just a waste of my time - actually decreasing the time I have available to deliver services that support vulnerable women.** Everybody knows there was no increase in trafficking or prostitution and that's been widely acknowledged now, not just by frontline services who didn't expect a massive increase - we didn't ever believe all the hype and scaremongering - but by the police too. **The only people who are in a position to actually know whether that the case [an increase in prostitution or trafficking] are frontline services like ours, as we have baseline data for the number of women we've seen historically, and are able to compare. But that knowledge base was completely ignored at a policy level.***

*Fairly involved in some forums, like at City Hall and one with a local authority. With the local authority, there was a partnership with the police, the council and a few other projects. There were several meetings and the idea seemed to be to try to source a big amount of EU funding in the belief that there'd be a big increase in prostitution in the run up to the Olympics. I was trying to be realistic, say that we didn't expect there to be any great increase in prostitution, but also to stay involved so we could expand our service if that did actually occur. But as time went on, we felt less and less included – one project seemed really keen to take the lead and get most of the funding and seemed to have a lot more time for this than I had – **we have a service to run, we're always really really busy, and it was taking my time away from that, and what I was saying just wasn't getting heard.** Senior police were very clear very early on that they didn't expect an increase in trafficking or prostitution.*

*The London-wide meetings, at the GLA, were quite difficult – I felt that there was no acknowledgement of a lot of the issues we raised, they wouldn't even be minuted and **there was a real aggression to drive through a pre-set agenda. I didn't feel heard, and I didn't think the other frontline services were being heard. I found them really stressful** – at least at the local authority one, people were nice to each other, but **at the GLA there was a lot of aggressive behaviour**, people pulling faces while you were speaking, that sort of thing, and some of the ideas people were coming up with were just ridiculous – like leaflets for Polish construction workers on the Olympic site to warn them against buying sex – there's no evidence that would happen and quite racist about Polish people!*

*Well, of course there was that crazy group – one NGO organised an event presented as about London-wide prostitution policy, that I attended, so I suppose the answer's is yes - and **no, I didn't feel heard.** The GLA group was the same – we weren't invited and only heard about in a really round-about way. And even once there, **I hated going to those meetings – our concerns were never taken seriously**, you just got pat answers at the most, if you got an answer at all. It felt like you were just being palmed off.*

Did policy making reflect the needs of your service users?

*No, not at all. It's made it harder for them, **they're less likely to report crimes because they don't trust the police as much as they used to.** When we were doing outreach over the Olympics, it was just dead, and it's done more harm to the women because they've made less money.*

No. We work with so many migrant people but we don't see any of the kind of people – people who are totally coerced and utterly victimised - that seemed to be the focus of concern at those meetings. The meetings didn't reflect the needs of our service users at all.

No. Policy leaned very much toward focusing on smaller but very significant issues such as exploitation and the needs of the majority of our service users don't fall into that category. There were other issues about the Olympics that affected their access to services but these concerns were sidelined in the determination to focus on a very small group. When you're trying to deliver a service, you have to look at everybody's needs, not just focus on the extreme cases.

*How that panned out practically – as a health provider, **the focus on trying to eliminate sex work during the Olympics and shutting a load of premises down, [the effect] was to alienate and displace our regular client group** – in consequence, we couldn't contact them, couldn't support them. By trying to stop a perceived idea of exploitation, that had a knock on effect of disrupting mainstream venues for commercial sex. So we weren't able to deliver a consistent and reliable to outreach.*

Did not seem to impact on them.

*No. It didn't really impact on the street sex workers. As far as the indoor workers are concerned, it was different in different boroughs. One wasn't too bad, but one closed flats wholesale, **it was a nightmare.** **Women were moving out of contact, interventions with them would fall down, there was less trust, women stopped reporting crimes against them – it was just horrendous. Women being thrown out with no regard for their safety.***

I was involved a couple of the meetings and raised concerns but felt the agenda was already set and it was mainly around trafficking.

*The problem with enforcement is that it has consequences for health and other service providers. Enforcement is intended to disrupt – so it means we lose patients – it’s like trying to give something with one hand and taking it away with the other, and **what you’re taking away is the access to a good health service that sex workers have a right to access.** If sex workers experience negative treatment by one area of the state (the police), they lose trust in other areas of the state (health services). This is particularly the case for migrant sex workers, who are often from countries where different areas of the state work much more closely together, where there may be no confidentiality, for example. So if you’re trying to deliver clinical care to someone – for example, medication over a period to treat an individual’s infection – and they’re forced to move on, or withdraw from services due to lack of trust, it really impedes that contact. **Instead of making one visit as a result of one phone call, you’re looking at repeated attempts to contact a single individual and persuade them to continue to engage. So obviously that prevents you from delivering a service to as many people as each client requires more time.** Some migrants have even thought that we’ve passed information to the police – it’s a small but very important break in trust, in building up relationships with people who may have no other support. And for us, in addition to the waste of time, there’s a public health issue – if someone has an untreated infection, whether they’re engaging in sex for money or for free, they are potentially passing that infection on to others. **So this policy environment, this enforcement environment, actively impedes public health. And now we have to rebuild relationships with people who are frightened and mistrustful.** As a clinical service, there are clear clinical guidelines, and it’s almost impossible to follow those, to deliver the kind of results that we’re ordinarily able to do, if people are actively avoiding what they see as a dangerous part of the state.*

*I think policy just doesn’t [reflect the needs of service users]. Our approach is lead by service user need, but enforcement, arrest, just doesn’t help the women. If we could get the women into accommodation, linked up with a drugs treatment agency, then you can help someone move on. But **when she’s playing hide and seek with the police, you can do nothing.** It used to be I could negotiate with the police, but now they’ll do nothing. **If one of the women reports rape or something to the police, it feels like they don’t believe her.** I try to make sure she knows that I believe her, but women are stuck between a rock and a hard place in policy making. There needs to be an education process where prostitution is concerned – within the police, with the benefits agency, with policy makers. We were at a meeting recently with a really senior local authority staff member and other staff, and they can’t offer people any privacy to discuss what’s going on. Sex workers seeking help need to be treated with real sensitivity and they just didn’t seem to understand that – how can someone talk about rape, about prostitution, in a situation that can be heard by everyone in the room?*

*Quite the contrary. Brothel closures, the whole focus around victims in brothels was a complete – it's been known for years that victims of trafficking, overwhelmingly, are not found in brothels - they are trafficked and sexually exploited within closed community groups. It was ridiculous, the idea, for example, that the Games Makers would be trained to look for trafficked victims – what are they looking out for, a foreign accent? [laughs] – but **the Games were used as an opportunity to perpetuate the myths around prostitution and major sporting events by organisations and individuals who take an ideological view of prostitution, rather than one informed by the evidence base.***

*I can remember going to the first meeting and there were all these people who saw themselves as experts, and they were talking about things that we just don't see – we see thousands of sex workers a year, and **these people didn't seem to know anything about the ordinary reality of the sex industry in London, and when you talked about that it was like being the kid pointing out the emperor's new clothes, nobody wanted to know.***

Did policy making reflect the evidence base (the research produced by academics, government bodies or other NGOs) around prostitution and trafficking?

We felt policy making did not reflect any evidence produced and was done on hearsay and media hysterical analysis.

No. The most simplistic way of saying it, is they were conflating prostitution and trafficking, speaking about those as if they were the same – they're totally different. Yes, there are lots of migrant women, but that's not the same as trafficking. And, under the guise of campaigning around trafficking, you're doing women who aren't trafficked a disservice.

*No, it clearly didn't seem as if they'd looked at the evidence correctly - they'd have seen from other countries that prostitution and trafficking doesn't increase for major sporting events. Instead **we got this crazy journey that's put women at more risk – the better places have closed, there's more unprotected (condom-free) [sexual] services going on, we're hearing that people are working in taxi flats that are only open at night, with clients being brought to the flat by taxi drivers, they're too scared to advertise so that's how they're getting clients. It's one more third party involved, one more person taking a cut out of what the woman gets for the services. That's a direct impact of the policing the run up to the Olympics.***

It's almost impossible for some migrants to work legally – even though they have the right to be in the country, it's almost impossible for them to get a job and pay tax.

*No. It clearly didn't [reflect the evidence base]. **Policy was based on the ideology – the belief that prostitution is a form of exploitation - of a few projects who were driving the agenda and using trafficking to get support for their work, both financial and political.** They seem to believe that migrant workers who are working from economic need should be considered coerced through poverty. That simply doesn't reflect the experience of the hundreds of people we see every year.*

No, because the actual evidence is that while there are some very serious issues relating to exploitation, the numbers are quite small. As a person going to the GLA meetings for the first time, it felt like the large number of people and the kinds of groups attending those meetings, were disproportionate and sometimes irrelevant to the kinds of issues we actually see, and the prevalence of exploitation.

Not at all, not at all. It was complete fantasy, fantasy that has its roots far more in the ideology of various feminist groups who were using it to promote their views, not the reality. It didn't reflect any of the academic data, all the information we have about what happens in prostitution, what happens for the small number of people who are actually trafficked into the sex industry, what's been seen at other major sporting events – not at all. And of course, for me as a service manager, if we had been seeing lots of people who needed support – especially victims of trafficking, who need a lot of support, I would have been talking that up, because I would have been trying to raise the resources I need to give the support those women need.

I think because they don't consult with us, and because there are some organisations that present their work as if it's the only work in the area at best they're working from an incomplete picture. They never refer to any academic studies when they're talking about prostitution. There's a desire to just "get the women out" [of prostitution], not give them the support they need to make decisions for themselves in line with what they want and how they want their lives to progress.

Did you see increased enforcement or increased services (from other support projects) for people in the sex industry in the run up to the Olympics?

Definitely increased enforcement – brothel closures and ASBOing of street sex workers. I was aware of numerous services pitching up saying they were going to “save the women”, but I’ve no idea if they lasted. Certainly there was at least one short term local service from an organisation that doesn’t usually work round here - as far as I’m aware, they didn’t see a single person.

No increased services except one service that would only help women if they wanted to exit – we’re lead by what service users need, so we wanted it to be open to everyone. When they expanded their support to include women whether or not they were looking to exit, we worked with them.

*Increased enforcement – there was an increase in brothel closures in the boroughs we work in. In one borough, there was a complete focus on “cleaning up the streets” and it was such a mistake, they completely lost the trust of street sex workers and they’re still trying to re-build those links. It was harder to do outreach, too – **places you’d been going to for ages would close, and you’d lose touch with all the people you’d been supporting there.***

We definitely had reports from our service users about increased enforcement. At a local level, our client group anticipated, as did many small businesses, increased customers. So we put on extra outreach sessions, we prepared to offer an out of hours response. But it turned out that business was extremely disappointing. All our service users found business dropped, so their plan to make a bigger profit, as lots of London businesses hoped, from the Olympics, just didn’t happen. There was also a lot of extra policing and visible officialdom in some areas, which would have been very off putting for a potential customers, particularly if they were from outside London or unfamiliar with the UK.

*There’s a real vogue for seeing prostitution as violence against women – “clear the streets, take them all out” - but often that’s done in a way that displaces women. If she’s [moved] out of borough, we’re not supposed to help her, so displacement actively harms women’s access to services. There are some brothels round here that have run for years, caused no trouble to anyone, and I don’t think they’ve been affected at all. Enforcement over the Olympics was a bit hit and miss as police had to work on other areas, but when they weren’t on Olympic duties they would be out targeting women. They made quite a few more arrests than usual – they’d caution women repeatedly but still be able to say they “haven’t arrested the women” but to the women it’s the same – she’s forced by the police off the road, we can’t see her, we can’t offer support. **Women are safer all round if they’re visible. This is a violent [geographical] area – lots of unreported crime against the women.** We see lots of undocumented women too, but they’re working indoors – whether someone’s trafficked or whether they’re just undocumented, they’ll work offstreet to avoid the police. To put your papers [for residency] through a solicitor is expensive, - there’s no legal aid, so people do what they have to do to earn the money.*

Did what you saw on the ground reflect the policy making decisions you were aware of?

It's not that I don't want police out there, and I agree they are in a difficult situation – they want to protect vulnerable people but they're also supposed to arrest vulnerable people. How can you build a relationship of trust with someone who can arrest you? All the women want to do is tell the police to fuck off, they're aggressive, because even if they know their rights, they don't know how to talk to the police to get treated with respect.

Not really. We wanted to increase outreach, doing more in boroughs where we thought people might be displaced because of increased enforcement against street sex workers where they originally worked. Otherwise, it was just business as usual – for us, and for the sex workers.

No. A lot of the publicity materials around trafficking misunderstand the people who are in that potentially exploitative position, it doesn't reflect how they see themselves so it's not a helpful image or media for reaching out to them. We need to listen to people who've been in those kind of situations and ask them what would have communicated effectively to them.

*Well, the policy decisions I was around for were based on this idea of a vast increase in the number of sex workers supposedly coming over here to earn lots of money. **Certainly the funds weren't made available to offer the support needed if this myth [of increased prostitution due to a major sporting event] had come true.***

Is there anything else you'd like to add?

I think involvement of organisations like ours as advocates is really important – we hear so much from women, really, really vulnerable women, who need to be supported to get treatment [for drug or alcohol use], to exit, to change their lives in any way, and we see all that. It's not a five minute job, we offer long term support. One problem is the turnover in police officers – you try to build a relationship with them, and then they move on. And the councilors, they don't talk to us, they talk to the residents, they talk to the police, but they don't talk to us, let alone the women.

On reflection, my time [in the run up to the Olympics] would have been better spent dealing with service users here than going to meetings that seemed pretty purposeless, and with endless emails. If you're participating but nothing you say is actually incorporated and you never get contacted about any follow up actions, it's a complete waste of time.

We kept being told "we're not discussing that today" and we were never allowed to discuss things, we were just completely ignored.

I'd like to add how disgusted I am that so much time and energy was expended on disrupting the lives of people who are just trying to get on earn a living, the women selling sex. The process was totally dishonest, and was driven by a small number of people who were wanting to make a name for themselves, who saw an opportunity to benefit personally in terms of increased career exposure.

It was completely impossible to get anything on the agenda for how policy was made, we were completely ignored. It wasn't about democracy or communication, it was about managing the agenda to suit an ideology, nothing to do with services on the ground or the needs of the thousands of women we see.

There was a contrast between the projects that actually deliver frontline services, many of which have been around for a long time, and those who have an ideology, who wanted money – they didn't seem to want that money to deliver services to vulnerable people, but to use it as a way to promote their ethos, their opinion that all sex workers are being exploited. We weren't included in any opportunities to raise funds that came up through the GLA network. We weren't contacted about any follow up actions, even the ones we'd put ourselves forward for.

*I would like in future that if anyone wanted to make policy about a group – like sex workers – where there is already expertise, already services working with these groups, that we are included – and not just to tick a box, but actually involved and listened to. **They said we were being consulted and we weren't – nothing we said was listened to.***

It's not just the Olympics – they're still shutting places down and they don't think of the consequences for the women, it's driving it underground and we don't get any access to deliver services at all. Women still have families living in poverty, they still have to make a living, and they're less safe doing it.



Policies that solve problems are based in reality and on evidence,
rather than on ideology, assumptions,
emotion or dramatic individual cases.