

# NMN submission to the Sheffield University study on human trafficking and online sexual exploitation

## About us

[Nordic Model Now!](http://nordicmodelnow.org/) (NMN)<sup>1</sup> is a secular, feminist, grassroots women's group campaigning for the Nordic Model, the equality and human rights-based approach to prostitution. All members are unpaid volunteers and the group includes survivors of prostitution. We run on a shoestring budget and have no funding other than donations from supporters.

## Summary

We have identified a number of features of the big prostitution procurement websites that facilitate human trafficking and sexual exploitation. We provide information about these features under separate headings below, followed by a case study and observations from a support worker. We use AdultWork as an example but other sites (such as VivaStreet) are similar.

## A note about definitions

We have very serious concerns about the definition of human trafficking in the Modern Slavery Act 2015 (MSA) and how it does not conform to the definition set out in the [Palermo Protocol](#)<sup>2</sup> and other human rights instruments (such as the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings) that follow from that.

As a result, there is not only considerable confusion about what actually constitutes human trafficking, but also systemic official failure to recognise and identify the vast majority of victims of human trafficking for the purposes of the exploitation of their prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation (sex trafficking). For more about these concerns, please see our submission to [GRETA's third evaluation of the United Kingdom](#).<sup>3</sup>

## Registration and review mechanisms

AdultWork and similar websites enable punters to review the (mostly) women they buy sexual access to – and vice versa. Many people assume, and even argue, that this makes it safer for the women because it allows them to screen punters. However, this is a misunderstanding of how the review mechanism works and how it interacts with other features.

Unlike Airbnb, where both participants have to upload photo ID, on Adultwork only the advertisers have to. Punters are not normally required to provide photo ID. So if a punter gets a bad review, unlike the woman, he can simply create a new profile.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://nordicmodelnow.org/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/ProfessionalInterest/Pages/ProtocolTraffickingInPersons.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> <http://nordicmodelnow.files.wordpress.com/2020/03/nmn-submission-to-greta-3rd-evaluation.pdf>

Punter reviews determine how much women can charge in the future and how many punters they will attract. Of course punters know this and use it to their advantage – for example, to coerce women to engage in more painful and risky behaviour or to give discounted rates.

The review mechanism and its unequal design therefore provides a built-in tool for pimps/traffickers to control women. Most ‘bad’ reviews are triggered by women not ‘pleasing’ the punter – not letting him have his own way, or not convincing him that she is enjoying it, for example. Our [own research](#)<sup>4</sup> on punter forums shows that the vast majority of punters give not a jot if the woman they are using is clearly unhappy or shows signs of being coerced or trafficked.

As a result, traffickers can just sit back and let the punters do the work of ensuring their victims are compliant. And if they aren’t compliant, there are always all the old favourite means of control from the [pimp rule book](#).<sup>5</sup>

### **Features for third parties**

AdultWork has a feature that allows third parties to set up an escort agency profile with multiple individual profiles connected to it. Punters can click on the escort agency profile and see the profiles of all the women connected to that agency. While photo ID is required to set up the women’s profiles, there is no mechanism to stop third parties selling other women, and even girls younger than 18, behind those profiles.

### **Private galleries**

AdultWork has a private gallery feature where advertisers can upload intimate photos and videos that punters must pay to view.

When the profile has been set up by a third party as part of his escort agency, the profits typically go directly to that third party. This provides them with an additional revenue stream that can continue long after the individual women have managed to escape their clutches.

### **Profiteering from sex trafficking**

The AdultWork features we have described above clearly facilitate pimping/sex trafficking. Such sites are therefore aiding and abetting sex trafficking and directly profiting from it. The [profits](#)<sup>6</sup> that these sites make are vast and are often siphoned into tax havens.

### **Case study**

Megan (not her real name) is a member of the NMN group. A few years ago when she was in her early 20s and particularly vulnerable, she was lured and tricked into prostitution. Her pimp advertised her on AdultWork. He had a profile on the site for his escort agency that listed her and a number of other women. He made full use of this ‘feature’ to exploit the

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<sup>4</sup> <http://nordicmodelnow.org/myths-about-prostitution/myth-punters-care-about-the-women-they-buy/>

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.prostitutionresearch.com/How prostitution works.pdf](http://www.prostitutionresearch.com/How%20prostitution%20works.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> <http://nordicmodelnow.org/2019/07/11/online-pimping-a-new-dystopia/>

prostitution of a number of vulnerable young women. He worked with an informal network of other men to accomplish this.

What he did to Megan clearly fits the Palermo Protocol definition of sex trafficking – he recruited her by taking advantage of her vulnerability and coercing and tricking her – all for the purpose of exploiting (i.e. profiting from) her prostitution.

However, because of the way human trafficking is defined and understood in the UK, and the [police focus](#)<sup>7</sup> on ‘organised crime,’ which is usually interpreted as gangs of foreign or ethnic minority men, Megan’s pimp was not recognised as the human trafficker that he clearly was. He was convicted of the lesser offence of controlling prostitution for gain and got a risible sentence – even though the police calculated he had made hundreds of thousands of pounds from the exploitation of several women’s prostitution over a period of five years.

For more on Megan’s story, see [Megan King](#).<sup>8</sup>

## **The support worker**

We showed in [Online Pimping: A New Dystopia](#)<sup>9</sup> that Adultwork charges organisations that provide support to women in prostitution for all but the most basic listing. However, for such organisations, these sites are a key tool for identifying and contacting women in indoor prostitution.

One woman who works for such an organisation said:

*“I constantly see multiple profiles (5, 10, 15 even) which are clearly connected to a third party as they all have the same mobile number, are written in the same format and the pictures were taken in the same room. This is a clear indication that the law against pimping and trafficking is being broken but AdultWork has no mechanism to stop it and the police don’t appear very interested.”*

## **Conclusion**

AdultWork and similar sites make it extraordinarily easy for sex traffickers to exploit the prostitution of vulnerable women and girls. In fact it is hard not to come to the conclusion that these sites have been specifically designed for this purpose.

If the UK is serious about cracking down on human trafficking, it must hold websites that facilitate sex trafficking and who profiteer from women and girls’ prostitution to account, as it is obliged to under international law.

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<sup>7</sup> <http://nordicmodelnow.org/2019/04/29/a-sexist-prism-national-police-guidance-on-policing-prostitution/>

<sup>8</sup> <http://nordicmodelnow.org/testimonial/megan-king/>

<sup>9</sup> <http://nordicmodelnow.org/2019/07/11/online-pimping-a-new-dystopia/>