

# Exeter University debate: “This house believes that sex work is real work”

This is a transcription the University of Exeter Debating Society debate on Friday, 18 September 2020. The motion was: “This house believes that sex work is real work.” Most of the chair’s comments have been omitted.

At the time of writing, the video of the debate was available at:

<http://www.facebook.com/watch/live/?v=715862785667571>.

**Proposing the motion – Jerry Barnett:** My name is Jerry Barnett. I’m the author of a book called ‘Porn Panic’ and I write regularly about sex and science and the economics of sex. My Twitter ID is @pornpanic. I also have a YouTube called Sex and Censorship where I interview sex workers, political activists, musicians, and various other interesting people.

This Exeter debate has become a regular feature for me and I think this is either my fourth or fifth time here. Sadly this year because of the pandemic, there will be no after-debate drinks in The Ram, which is probably the best bit to be honest. And I hope to see some of you back at The Ram in 2021 should I be invited back.

Last year at this time, myself and Charlotte Rose were both here to discuss the proposition, ‘This house would watch porn’ and we won the debate because you would watch porn, wouldn’t you? And in fact you do.

This year we’re here to discuss the proposition that sex work is real work and let’s face it, it is, isn’t it? So I’m going to use this definition of work: A voluntary exchange of time or labour for money or some other payment. So that includes various forms of prostitution but also includes other activities like stripping, playing in pornographic movies, doing live web-cam sessions, or uploading photos and videos to sites like Only Fans where people can pay to view them.

Sex work isn’t just work. It’s well-paid work. It provides a way to earn a decent income in short flexible hours. For that reason, it suits people who want to earn a lot in a short time. It suits people who want to work short hours. It suits people with children. It suits students and it suits people with careers they love but don’t pay very well. I know people from rock musicians to freelance journalists who do sex work in order to maintain a career they enjoy but doesn’t necessarily pay enough to live on comfortably.

There are caveats of course. There are some sex workers who dislike what they do but they do it because it’s the only job that can give them the income and flexibility they need – if, for example, they’re single parents or they’re struggling with drug problems or with mental health problems. I’ve known people who are quite possibly incapable of holding down any

other job and who quite possibly might be unable to keep a roof over their heads or clothe their children without sex work.

But equally there are people who enjoy the work and who enjoy the lifestyle that goes with it. Of course, it might be a career option that seems fun for a 20-year old, less fun at 30, and no fun at 40. Then again, I've known people who are able to own their own home mortgage-free thanks to doing sex work and so have far more freedom and flexibility later in life when they no longer want to do it.

There's another big caveat in that mostly this isn't a career for men. Almost all the money paid for sex in its various forms is paid by men. Most of the income is earned by women and most of the income that's earned by men is earned in gay sex work. So, if you're a straight guy and you're not drop-dead gorgeous with a perfect physique, this isn't going to pay your bills. Sorry.

Now, of course there are people who disapprove of sex work and who try to present sex workers as victims and they mix up ideas like sex work and sex trafficking. They falsely suggest that a high proportion of sex workers are coerced. The truth is the trafficking narrative is hugely exaggerated to provide propaganda for the anti-sex work lobby.

Most of what's called trafficking is not people being kidnapped and sold as the anti-prostitution lobby would have you believe but often simply refers to prostitution. The anti-trafficking movement is heavily funded by religious money and supported by anti-immigration activists.

When brothels are raided and women arrested, they present this as the rescue of oppressed women. In fact, anti-trafficking raids are often just a tool for identifying and deporting illegal immigrants.

I'll finish with a quote by the academic, Camille Paglia, which someone sent me this afternoon on Twitter. She said, "The prostitute is not, as feminists claim, the victim of men, but rather their conqueror, an outlaw, who controls the sexual channels between nature and culture". Thank you. (16.02)

**Opposing the motion – Anna Fisher:** The first question we must ask is, what do we mean by 'sex work'? Because this term is used to cover many things, including: web-camming, sex phone line work, stripping, as well as 'full-service sex work' or prostitution. It's even used to cover pimping.

These are not all the same. Obviously.

So can anyone speaking tonight claiming to be a sex worker, please clarify what sort of 'sex work' you're involved in. Because there's a tendency for privileged students to dabble in a

little stripping or to briefly date a ‘sugar daddy’ and later claim to speak for all – when in fact their experiences are not representative of the majority of those caught up in prostitution.

However, all the different forms of ‘sex work’ are problematic: The ‘customers’ are almost entirely male and those providing the so-called ‘service’ are mostly (but not entirely) female; all normalise and eroticise male dominance and one-sided sex; all feed men’s entitlement and reduce their empathy. These attitudes underpin the current epidemic of rape, child sexual abuse, and other forms of male violence against women and children.

But I don’t have much time so I’ll stick to talking about prostitution, per se.

I want to tell you how some of the women in Nordic Model Now! who’ve been in prostitution describe it.

First Megan. When she was 23 and particularly vulnerable, she went on a date with an older man she’d ‘met’ online. On that very first date, he pimped her – totally unexpectedly. It took her nine months to escape his clutches.

She says:

*“If ‘real work’ is having a 70-year-old drunk man getting aggressive and asking for his money back because you won’t continue without a condom... If work is being filmed having sex without your consent... If work is being slapped, beaten and told you are a worthless whore... Then yes it’s work.”*

Next Harriet. Due to a series of personal catastrophes, at the age of 26 she was facing street homelessness and turned to prostitution to avoid it. She described it like this:

*“People think prostitution is about having consensual sex for money. It’s not. Those men don’t want to pay for that. They paid me and then used me however they wanted. I was beaten with objects until I bled; spat at; anally raped; passed around at sex parties like a toy, men slipping off their condoms; I was shouted at, threatened, choked, told to look like I enjoyed it or he’d take the money back.*

*“I was scared every single second.”*

You may think these experiences are not typical, but we have testimony from more than 80 women on our website that tell a similar story.

The next question we must ask is what is ‘real work’? The nearest I came to finding a definition is the UN’s one for ‘decent work.’ It says:

*“Decent work is productive work for women and men in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.”*

Can prostitution meet this definition? I don't think so. But in case you're not convinced, let's consider what punters actually pay for.

He pays her:

1. So he can use her body, including her vagina, rectum, mouth and breasts, for his personal gratification.
2. So he'll be assured of flattery.
3. So he can insult her – for example, by calling her 'bitch' or 'whore'.
4. So the exchange takes place outside all the conventions that govern normal human interactions.

This shows that prostitution is something that someone with more status and resources does to someone with less. It is not productive.

As Dana Levy, another prostitution survivor put it, "In prostitution, there is a certain amount of labour and actual service – but it's not a prerequisite for the deal. The minimum condition is only that you have body temperature."

So, no, prostitution is not real work. Rather it's a mechanism to maintain male dominance and the patriarchal system, which is the fertile ground in which all other systems of oppression thrive.

**Proposing the motion – Charlotte Rose:** (22.15) Hi all, I am Charlotte Rose @rosetalkssex on Twitter. I'm a former multi-award-winning escort, current radio presenter and advocate for decriminalisation of sex work.

I just want to discuss something that may affect your moral judgement. How do you all feel when I mention people who work in abortion clinics, abattoirs, factory farmers, nuclear power station workers? To name just a few. For me I do not like it. But just because we do not like what these people do, it doesn't give us the right to state that their work is not legitimate.

What winds me up the most about these sorts of debates is that until you've worked as a sex worker, you've got no right whatsoever to dictate anything against what I do – or others. The ignorance of people is that most of the opposing arguments are based around sexual abuse, exploitation or trafficking, which have nothing to do with sex work. Sex work consists of consent. Anything that doesn't is illegal and remember, sex work is legal.

For those of you who don't know what I mean, it means that people who choose to do sex work, like myself, and people who don't – and people who don't need the support to exit. But those who do need to be removed from that conversation. A conversation in which many radical feminists think they know what's best for us. And trust me, they don't. Their conversations are misconstrued around violence towards women, which doesn't even take

into consideration men who work in the sex industry. So already they've got a sexist, dehumanised view of my work. And these people are the ones who cause the most dangers to people like me – spreading misinformation about something they know nothing about.

So, we've heard from the opposition and how they want to delegitimise my work, let me tell you what it actually entails. It begins at 7am with my phone – switch it on and wait for hundreds of messages to come flooding through. I switch my laptop on and wait for the emails to ping. On an average day I would receive around 80 emails, 120 text messages, 60 phone calls and 50 notifications, and I have to respond to each one. If that doesn't sound like work to you, then bloody hell what have I been doing for 20 years?

People think that sex work is lying on your back, legs in the air and everybody's welcome. Well that's certainly not the case. Sex work is 80% admin. Admin also includes marketing and advertising and there are many different platforms you can advertise your work on. So if you move into an area, you have to update each one – make sure each account is switched, that you're available for work, update your photos, and any special offers. Yes, sex workers give special offers too, depending on the month and days.

We have to consider our yield. How much we're paying for advertising – because advertising does not come cheap – and you also have to update your own website, which includes hosting costs, SEO costs.

So, let me break all this down for you. I have a website which includes social media to promote myself. I have to answer my phones to be able to make bookings and arrange my work schedule. After this I'm going to have to book myself into an Airbnb or hotel and then of course meet my clients.

So, from 7am to 7pm, I'm not just a sex worker but a receptionist, a marketing manager, a campaign director, advertising guru, personal assistant, media manager, and bookings manager to make my own sex work persona.

So as far as I am concerned, other people in my category that consist of these particular roles are CEOs, lawyers, bankers, and even MPs. And the one thing that we all do that's the same – and excuse my language – is we all fuck people.

I don't just provide sex for people. There is so much more to sex work than just sex. This discussion is about sex work is real work and if any of you can tell me that what I've just described to you didn't sound like work, then I have no idea what work is.

The last thing I'll mention is that Caroline Farrow is here tonight for the opposition. Her Twitter bio also states that she's a campaign director and media commentator. Well doesn't that sound similar to the work that I do? I've told you that this is what I do. So maybe you and I, Caroline, have got something in common. Or will you dismiss this because you don't want to do anything similar or activity towards a sex worker?

Folks, sex work is real work and it's hard work. But one thing I've always been told is you don't get something for nothing. Without hard work and determination, you'll never achieve anything.

Work hard, play hard, and live life. And lucky for me, my job gave me the ability to achieve all of those things – empowering me to be the best person I can be. Thank you.

**Opposing the motion – Caroline Farrow:** Thank you for inviting me here. I will try and address Charlotte's points, but maybe afterwards.

So, labour, toil, exertion, effort, slog – all of these words are synonyms for work and they aptly describe the process of selling your body for sex. Performing fellatio, being penetrated in one or all of your orifices, ten or more times a day by often physically repellent men lacking in personal hygiene in return for payment definitely constitutes work of a back-breaking and soul-destroying variety.

You know, as Anna said when she was quoting another survivor of prostitution, she said, if work is being slapped, beaten and told you're a worthless whore, then yes, it's work. But just because something constitutes work doesn't mean that it is inherently good, harmless or empowering or that it should be accepted as the norm, as perhaps the title of this debate suggests.

In fact the only reason we really use the term 'sex work' instead of what the majority of it is – which is prostitution – is to legitimise and sanitise it and ??? the sex trade, which is a gross affront to human dignity and a form of modern slavery from which many of its participants cry out for relief.

You know throughout history we've used euphemisms to describe the most egregious abuses of human rights. Years ago, a pro-slavery strategist suggested that the phrase, 'slave' should be replaced by 'assistant planters.' Then, he said, we shall not then hear such violent outcry against the slave trade by pious divines, tender-hearted protestors and short-sighted politicians. When we use the term 'sex work,' we are doing exactly the same thing.

Now the reason why the phrase 'sex work' is used to normalise the commodification and use of bodies – and it is, as Jerry said, predominantly female bodies used for the sexual gratification of men.

Sex work is a term that must be rejected because it is all about decreasing the stigma around prostitution and making it a job like any other when clearly it's not.

For those of you who might think that slavery is a bit strong and hyperbolic a term, consider this. It doesn't matter if you supposedly consented to let your body be used for sex, in that moment of penetration, you've given up your agency and the ordinary rules about sexual consent do not apply. Once the act has begun, the punter cannot be compelled to stop, no

matter how painful, and often causing pain, sexually violating, degrading or harming the woman only adds to the client's pleasure.

You know, sexual consent relies on three things: The freedom to choose a sexual partner, the freedom to select the nature of the sexual activity and the freedom to choose the timing. If any one of these conditions is missing, the sex is forced. If money has to be used to coerce or induce any of these elements, then the consent is clearly defective.

Look, handing over your body to another person to be used for their desire is abusive. It's exploitative. It's dehumanising for both parties actually and shouldn't be accepted as a legitimate way to make money.

Prostitution isn't simply a job that is sometimes highly unpleasant like – for example, you often see it compared with something like cleaning toilets. The difference is that firstly some of these low-paid jobs like cleaning toilets, you know, actually that needs to happen for the common good.

Nobody has ever died or become ill through not being able to have sex or not being able to access someone else's body for their gratification. And if we carry on with this toilet analogy of low paid, low skilled jobs, you know, no matter how undesirable a job might be and it's cleaning or it's flipping burgers, it's not going to put you in an increased risk of violence, assault, or injury. And neither will it result in you needing a specialist social support service just to help you leave.

Cleaning toilets, flipping burgers, any of those types of low-paid, low-skilled jobs aren't going to result in post-traumatic stress disorder, sexually transmitted infections or unplanned pregnancies.

If you decide to leave cleaning or retail, you're not going to have to go into hiding from your employers. Prostitution isn't normal work that we want our children or our friends and families to be involved in. We know they deserve better.

But if I go back to my low-paid, low-skilled cleaning toilets analogy, while these jobs might not carry social cachet, none of us would be concerned for our safety or well-being on account of this type of work.

And we also know that they are subject to laws and procedures that are designed to keep them safe and mitigate any workplace risks, as well as having basic protection like sick pay.

There are actually laws about prostitution and sex work being allowed to be advertised in a job centre – and with good reason. If prostitution was considered normal work, it would be something that your boss could just add to your job description. My boss could just turn round and say, Hey Caroline, we're really sorry but due to COVID, we've had to do a

restructure and change your job role so it now includes sleeping with our most senior clients or stripping off for clients.

Prostitution doesn't provide a skill or service, but rather a body. When we employ people to carry work out for us, their sex, their age, and their race is immaterial. If I want someone to sort out my computer or my tax, I don't care whether that person is male, female, how old they are or where they're from, but rather are they qualified and able to do the work for which they've been contracted.

The same principle can't be said for punters who won't accept a male body instead of a female or a mature body when they desire the body of a young girl.

Also in every other profession, experience and expertise matters. An experienced worker finds the work easier and is often able to perform it to a high standard and is paid more. But in prostitution, experience is a huge disadvantage. Punters never ask the brothel, who is the most experienced, but who is the youngest or do you have any new girls.

At the end of the day, the inside of your body. [Chair asks her to wrap up] Done.

**Pascale Watkins (chair):** We'll now move on to panel questions.

**Caroline Farrow:** Yes. I have a question for Jerry. Jerry said those who are against sex work and prostitution are religious. Well what's the issue with that? Does it really matter what informs our values and the way we think? So what if someone who is against sex work has a religious point of view? That's not inherently or necessarily a bad thing. It's just what's informing their values. (32.27)

**Jerry Barnett:** Sure. Absolutely. Plenty of... Yeah, people's views should be valid regardless whether they are religious or not. I think what I said was that the rescue industry – the anti-prostitution campaigning and the anti-so-called trafficking campaigning – is heavily funded by religious money – and that tends to... So it is directed by moralistic rather than evidence-based values. And again, there's nothing wrong with moralistic values. You can personally hate sex work, and it sounds like you do, but you should also base your campaigning and opposition on evidence and carefully reasoned argument rather than the fact that you find it disgusting.

**Caroline Farrow:** Sure, but is it a bad thing, we often read about women being rescued. Is that a bad thing – even if someone's got an agenda to do it? If people are helped out of an industry which is exploiting them and hurting them and women are being drugged and raped and all kinds of horrible things – which we know happen. Surely that's not a bad thing?

**Jerry Barnett:** The rescue industry is...

**Charlotte Rose:** Speaking as somebody who worked in the industry for over 20 years, unfortunately the majority that we talk about when we talk to feminist groups who classify

survivors and rescuing survivors, the specifics that you say .. Number one: Where do you get them from? Number two: As a feminists aren't you supposed be able to fight for a woman to choose. So these women have chosen to work in this industry and I don't understand why you want to put them into danger. And three: what is your personal opinion – because I remember last time you were at the uni and you were handing out leaflets outside with disgusting and degrading comments about sex workers – they were derogatory, they were directed at and degrading towards people and sex workers in general – so what is your personal view on this? Why have you got such a hatred towards sex workers? They are just human beings like anybody else.

**Caroline Farrow:** Well firstly, I'm really sorry if you feel that way because I don't have a hatred towards sex workers or any human beings. The leaflets I gave out were actually job descriptions of a typical prostitute.

**Charlotte Rose:** I mean I've just given you my job description of what I do every day. What you put was completely different.

**Caroline Farrow:** I think what we all have to accept is the concept of privilege. Although it is a very hackneyed concept, there is a vast difference, with respect Charlotte, between what you do and what you choose to do and women in Sudan or women in Thailand. Young girls who are exploited.

**Charlotte Rose:** I'm not talking about trafficking. Trafficking and coercion, sexual abuse are very different from prostitution. This is the different – that unfortunately people like yourself and academics always get misconstrued information for. You cannot conjoin the two. Trafficking is trafficking. Sex work is legal. Trafficking is illegal. So until we're able to distinguish that point, the more conversations you give about this, puts more sex workers like myself in danger.

**Caroline Farrow:** I'm sorry if you feel like that. But surely somebody's opinion doesn't put you in any more danger than –

**Charlotte Rose:** Of course it does because your opinion goes out to the masses, creating misconstrued information and that's the damage – because when it goes to criminalising the purchase of sex, all that does is it means that sex workers will have to go deeper underground in order to do their work and all the safety standards that they have are thrown out the window. Can you not actually see that what you're doing is actually causing more damage to human beings than protecting them which is what you want to do.

**Caroline Farrow:** I don't believe that that is the case and I certainly don't believe that ideas and debating things are dangerous and cause harm. I think actually when we start saying you can't debate x, y and z because it's dangerous – what I perceive as danger is the danger of violence, of drugs.

And you say that trafficking and sex work are different things but there is clearly and obviously an overlap. And also you talk about free choice, but actually very few of us, whatever choices we make, we rarely make choices in a vacuum.

**Anna Fisher:** Yes. I mean, I want to say that in our group, nearly half of our members have been in prostitution themselves and we absolutely do not hate people who are involved in prostitution and really that is quite an offensive thing to say.

**Charlotte Rose:** I wasn't addressing you when I said that.

**Anna Fisher:** OK. And nor are we coming from a moralistic standpoint. There was a case, a judicial review in Sheffield brought against Spearmint Rhino a couple of years ago in which the council – it was about their licensing application – and the council rejected a lot of arguments from women and people in the community which said that the lap dancing club caused – you know the men, there was a lot of harassment of women in that area and women didn't feel safe and things like that. And the council rejected these arguments and said they were moral values and rejected them.

The judicial review found that this was incorrect – the judge said these are equality arguments and this is about equality. And how can you have equality between men and women, boys and girls, when large numbers of women are essentially commodities that people can buy sexual access to?

It affects the status of all women. It affects the safety of all women. It feeds men's entitlement. It encourages all the attitudes that we know from research that underpin domestic violence, rape, child abuse, child sexual abuse. All those things. So it is a bigger issue and to frame it just as an individual choice, I think is misconstruing the arguments.

**Charlotte Rose:** Oh I don't mean to state that I represent all. Absolutely not. But I will discuss the Beyond The Gaze study. Over 2,000 sex workers were put into a study to find out their views about sex work and 97% stated that they love the flexibility, the empowerment and the safety that they have.

And considering... 2,000 sex workers is a low number within the UK. We know we're looking at about 160,000 sex workers in the UK – that do sex work. That do prostitution – consensual prostitution. The numbers of people, I'll say people, who are trafficked and coerced are a lot lower than this. But we know that. I understand that.

But this is the problem, when people are debating the information about trafficked and coerced people rather than sex workers. From my perspective of sex work is that it's out of a choice. You have people who choose to do it like myself and then you have people that have no other choice but to do it. And I would agree with you in that we need more exit strategies to be able to help people get out of the industry and better themselves in whatever way but by stating that – by demoralising the fact that my work is not prevalent, is not legitimate. It also

damaged the credibility that I have that if I have my fellow community like yourselves stating that my work is not legitimate, it's not recognised as work, then neither will men see it like that. So by disempowering me, by not recognising the work that I do, is not helping other females.

**Anna Fisher:** So I do not in any way mean to criticise you personally or your choices.

**Charlotte Rose:** But it's not me personally. This is what happens to all sex workers in all debates.

**Anna Fisher:** Our position is that no one should have to do that and if someone chooses to do that – the minority who choose it and say it is great, well, good luck to them.

But if it is legitimised as ordinary work, then that becomes the social security system for women, for single mums, the young women like the one, Harriet, I mentioned who had some catastrophes out of her control and she was going to be street homeless and she did it to keep a roof over her head. So that was not a choice out of, you know, many good choices. It was a lack of options that led her into that. And maybe because she had so few options she then had less negotiating power within it. If you have more options you might be able to negotiate a better position for yourself.

But we speak to many women who have had really bad experiences in prostitution in this country and in others. We're in touch with women in Australia, where it's legal in some states and decriminalised in New South Wales, and in New Zealand. And they are clear that legalising it, decriminalising it has not been the panacea that many people like to believe here.

**Charlotte Rose:** It's strange that you say that because I was there at Parliament when they did the symposium in regards to decriminalisation of sex work and there were 52 different continents [?] that people came to and stated how important it was that sex work is decriminalised. And maybe I should get you a copy of that – it's a symposium on the decriminalisation of sex work that should be available within Parliament.

One of the things that I wanted to add is that by delegitimising sex work as work is that this takes away my ability to be able to secure – to give me financial security in the future. I can't get a mortgage by writing down that I'm a sex worker – on my tax returns – I can't even state that I'm a sex worker on their tax returns. These are elements of not being able to have those abilities because it's not been recognised – is unfortunate to me and many thousands of other sex workers, male, female and trans all have the ability to choose what they want to do and by choosing sex work gives them the flexibility that they want to do. And if by doing so, earning the money that we earn, why aren't we able to have the ability to have a mortgage just like anybody else.

And this is the area here. When you're talking about people who have been disadvantaged during sex work due to trafficking and coercion and things like that. Yes absolutely, I am 100% supporting you in regards to giving them support and the exit strategies that they need. But that does not still give the right to the understanding that sex work, prostitution, consensual sex, isn't legitimised. So Jerry...

**Jerry Barnett:** I just wanted to come back. Some of the language used and some of the points made and often made by the anti-sex movement and the anti-sex feminist movement, tends to completely attempt to delegitimise the idea of consent, which is an incredibly dangerous thing to do and something that we'd be surprised that feminists would do. I think it was Caroline used the term 'consent is defective' because money is involved.

But generally, and most of what Caroline and Anna have both said is ultimately to attack – not to attack men's rights to pay for sex but to attack women's rights to sell sex. They say this is an issue for all women and this is about the rights of all women. But of course it's not, because you're actually campaigning to stop some women doing what they do and most of them choose to do because – you're claiming a women's right to stop other women selling sex.

So this is couched in feminist language of patriarchy as if it's an attack on men and male entitlement. It isn't. It's an attack on a massive industry that employs large numbers of women and pays them – lots of women – a lot of money.

There was briefly the anecdote about Spearmint Rhino and that women didn't feel safe in the area. The fact is I've been involved, I've got stripper friends who've been involved in these campaigns to keep the venues open and these claims are false. They come up over and over again – that the presence of a strip club in an area makes women less safe. This has been disproved, debunked, using evidence over and over and over again. So the idea that women don't feel safe in the area is a different thing. Unfortunately if women don't feel safe, that's sad but then they should acquaint themselves with the facts that actually the presence of a strip club in an area does not increase – lead to an increase in sexual violence. And yet these kinds of things are continuously claimed to make it look like this is a woman's rights movement rather than a morality movement, which it is.

**Caroline Farrow:** Well in relation to this particular Spearmint Rhino issue, you know again, this seems to be buying into – and I'm not a feminist – this is interesting – yes I have a lot of feminist sympathies but you know I probably can't be cast as a feminist. But this feeds into a lot of patriarchal ideas about silly hysterical women, not feeling safe. Well if only they understood the facts and the evidence and the science then they would.

But the thing is why don't women feel safe? Probably because most of us at some time have been sexually heckled, have been catcalled at. You know it's an everyday thing. And if you've been subject to a sex attack or sexual violence of any nature. When somebody calls

you out sexually, it is frightening. It is intimidating and it is that visual part of your brain and your body. You know that if a man attacks you, then you may not be able to fend him off. And if women are feeling unsafe it's because in these areas and in these red-light areas where there are sex workers, prostitutes, strippers, you know they are mistaken for one of them.

And you know actually when you see one of them, and obviously Jerry will disagree, it elicits a visceral response. So maybe she's one of those girls I can holler at. So a woman who's not feeling safe for whatever reason, she will be blamed and told she should acquaint yourself with the evidence and make yourself feel better – if only life was like that. If only I could walk down a dark street on my own at night and feel completely safe and as if nothing was going to happen. And not a single statistic will actually change that, particularly if you have been subject to violence or abuse of that nature.

**Anna Fisher:** Yes. I actually think it's quite offensive for a man to say that about women feeling unsafe. But I want to read you a piece from a young woman that she sent to us. She said, "I was a student at University College London and my campus was right next to Spearmint Rhino. Everyday as I passed it, I had to endure vile comments from the male clients. Not only that but many times I'd get approached by the personnel who worked there telling me about all the money I could make. It was horrible."

She goes on to say that her grandmother lives in Stuttgart in Germany, where we know that prostitution is legal, and she says they had this place called the Paradise Club – it's a large brothel owned by two rich men. "I've been in that part of town and you get harassed there, and this is the nasty bit, the men who use them are vile. If you're blonde, like I am, you get real sleezebags come on to you. Their attitude to women is appalling. They take it from the clubs and strip joints out onto the street."

I mean that's just one woman's testimony but it shows –

**Jerry Barnett:** That's not one woman's testimony. It's an anecdote.

**Chair:** On that note, I think we'll now move on to audience questions. This one is explicitly for Anna: There's exploitation in the music industry and the [?] and many are subjected to coercion and [?]. Does this mean a job with high risk are any less legitimate than those without?

**Anna Fisher:** So. Well. I think my argument is that prostitution is significantly different to any other work. And as I mentioned in my five minutes, in any other work – actually I didn't say this – but in any other work, you do something, you use your body, your mind, your emotions, you use your facilities to do something, which, you know, has some value.

In prostitution, the core element, the essence of it is that someone uses your body. That is not work. That is a fundamental violation of human dignity, and to me that is the difference. Yes, we live in a horrendously unequal society where there is horrendous exploitation, and

coercion, and poverty and racism and a horrendous situation for migrants – you know many terrible and, you know, I – we need to campaign on all those issues. But to me prostitution is significantly different and just like on the level of safety, I have ... A Canadian study estimated that women in prostitution have a forty times higher mortality rate than other women in the general population. And the murder rate is the highest – of women in prostitution – is the highest rate of any group, and that is true in this country. And in places where prostitution is legalised, the murder rate of women in prostitution usually remains high.

**Jerry Barnett:** I mean Anna is good with anecdotes but when she tries to use statistics they don't seem to add up at all. I think the last time I looked, the profession with the highest were police and fast food delivery people who are overwhelmingly men. But yeah, the anecdotes stack up, the statistics don't.

I mean the other thing that Anna said earlier is that we are experiencing an epidemic of rape. If you define an epidemic as a steep sustained increase then that's not true that we're experiencing. The Western world has seen a steep decline in sexual violence for 50 years. In the US it's been something like 85% over the past 30 years – so it's terrible that sexual violence exists and is still widespread but the idea that things have been getting worse as a result of increased access to porn and prostitution isn't true but the exact opposite of that has happened.

**Charlotte Rose:** Can I just add to that. Sorry. The highest murder rates for sex workers is where it has been criminalised. New Zealand where it is decriminalised has recorded no deaths since decriminalisation came in.

**Chair:** Thank you very much. I have another question here: Is it more accurate to say that laws on sex need updating to protect women from exploitation rather than current laws that restrict women's freedom and punishes them for their [?] coercion or otherwise?

**Caroline Farrow:** Well I kind of think that there's an interesting dichotomy going on here, because on the one hand, society is beginning to recognise and get our heads around the concept of sexual violence against women – after all it wasn't that long ago that marital rape was still legal. And we're seeing a lot of campaigning for... There are more and more women being killed or injured because supposedly a sex game has gone wrong, you know, as somebody is choked or otherwise injured. And the defence was, well it was consensual and something went a bit wrong and I didn't know how much force to use.

Now Jerry says that things aren't getting worse, but 40, 50 years ago, admittedly we don't have statistics on it, but strangling women, some of the practices that you can see online were certainly not mainstream. They may have existed but they weren't mainstream and normalised to the extent that they are now.

And so on the one hand we have more consent education saying that if you're having sex with a woman and she tells you to stop, then yeah that person's raping you and it's illegal. But in the case of prostitution and you're having sex with a punter and suddenly it becomes immediately very painful or whatever and you want it to stop, actually you can't force them. And these women don't actually have the agency to [?] at the time and they don't want to go to the police and how do you define where consent began or where it stops?

So there is a strange contrast going on where sex is not like having a cup of tea – there's a video and hear all the elements that need to be there for sex. And this is why I refer to it as slavery, because when you agree to have sex with someone for money, you are giving up complete control and complete agency over yourself to someone else. It might be for a very short period of time – but they have control over you and your body and you completely cease to be a person – you are just an object for them to use.

**Jerry Barnett:** Can I just... I just wanted to come in on a point – well a comment really on everything that Caroline's been saying. Everything she said about sex work could equally apply to sex – you can't say no after you've started. But yeah, you can.

And actually pretty much everything that Charlotte – err Caroline described about sex work applies equally to sex and one wonders if this is actually an anti-sex work campaign – or an anti-sex campaign.

**Caroline Farrow:** That's a very glib and unkind smear that women like me who don't agree with sex work and who think sex work is a violation of dignity. It's really easy to smear us as some kind of puritan, you don't like sex, you've got something up your backside. It's just nonsense.

You know, let's be very clear here, I have five children, I enjoy sex very much, and I don't even... I shouldn't even have to say that. My own personal viewpoint on whether sex is great or whatever should be completely irrelevant to what I am saying here.

It's not about being anti-sex, it's just actually acknowledging that sex has tremendous power, it has consequences, and actually we need to – like anything else in life – we need to respect sex. We need to respect it far more and not just use it as a commodity. Because it's not.

**Jerry Barnett:** Sure. No, I mean. That's fine. And I respect your right to hold all of those views. But what you're presenting as fact is actually your feelings and your opinion. And I know that you're a Catholic and again, that's not a slur, but this is just coming from your personal feelings about sex. You find that it's disempowering. You don't listen to sex workers who say it is empowering. You find it humiliating and therefore it is, and so on.

**Chair:** We're going to move on now. There's a question to Charlotte that's quite interesting: Why do you campaign for the decriminalisation of sex work as opposed to the legalisation of sex work.

**Charlotte Rose:** The difference between legalisation and decriminalisation – is legalisation is what happens in Amsterdam, but women, or sex workers, should I say because just to remind people, there are men sex workers, there are trans sex workers and women sex workers.

In Amsterdam, they have to pay for a licence. So first of all, they've got to give a large amount of money to be able to get a licence to give them the ability to work and be in a legitimate premise.

Number one, they cost a lot of money. Number two, their details are known so there's no anonymity. If someone wants their business not to be known to the government, then unfortunately they won't be able to work. So these two massive factors are why we don't want it to be legalised.

Now the difference between criminalising and decriminalising is criminalising means that you're making the purchase of sex illegal and the problem with that is that it's people – for example in Northern Ireland where it's been criminalised, the amount of rape has gone up, the amount of people going over the border to work has gone up. The competition has increased because it is only risk takers that are happy with purchasing sex. And because of that they then get the opportunity to dictate all of the things that Caroline's on about.

So they say the safety standards of the sex worker will drop because of the high competition, other standards, sexual standards whether they'll use a condom will drop, because of the rise in competition. Because while criminalising the purchase of sex seems to be a great idea to those with feminist and religious views, it is actually doing more danger because it drives it deeper underground.

Having it out in the open gives people the opportunity to feel safe; to be able to discuss consent properly; to be able to say the dos and don'ts of the transaction. And that's what we need to do.

It doesn't matter what moral opinion you have on sex work, we all want people to be safe and that what the big thing is at the end of the day – is safety. It is nothing to do with the moral opinion or moral judgement about what they believe should or shouldn't be in place.

**Chair:** I have a question here I think for the opposition: Many women are beaten and forced into marriages across the world. Many men use marriage to control women. Should we criminalize marriage? And she does have a follow up argument in regard to something Caroline said and that is that three women are murdered by their partners a week in the UK. Shall we criminalize marriage?

**Caroline Farrow:** You're not really comparing apples and pears here because the fact is that forced marriages are illegal. Anyone who's ever had any involvement in the wedding business, the marriage business, you know, whether you have a religious or civil marriage,

one of the components of it is that it must be freely undertaken and we have laws in this country about going abroad for forced marriages.

So it's not that that the institution of marriage is in and of itself – although there's a feminist critique that it's patriarchal – but it's not that marriage causes people to be abusive or to misuse it.

It's a bit like saying knives are – cause a bit of damage – people can get a knife and stab someone and therefore we should ban all knives. Clearly that's not practical and that's not the purpose of knives.

It is interesting because we're talking about Charlotte and Jerry are saying well Caroline is being moralistic. But there is nothing wrong with being moralistic. Morals inform our, you know, society and society's laws and values. We can all agree that theft is wrong. That is a moral value. So saying someone comes from a moralistic point of view doesn't necessarily mean that morals are bad or have absolutely no place. Of course, morals have a place in debate and in society and when we're thinking about legislation.

And Anna's argument and my argument is that actually you have to look at the impact of sex work, of prostitution, on the greater good of society. The impact on women, the impact on men. It isn't just about individual freedom to do whatever you please.

You have to acknowledge that with rights come responsibilities and it is about looking at the common good and the greater good rather than – well if I want to do this, this is my right to do this. If you don't like drink driving, don't drink and drive. Everything we do in life is informed by morals and moral values and I don't think we should shy away from that. OK, our morals may differ but you say Caroline, you're so moralistic – well so what? That's not in and of itself a bad thing or a condemnatory thing.

Not everything has to be necessarily 100 – yes we need evidence-based policy and we need to make sure that we get things right but actually there's nothing wrong in saying, do you know what, as a society, we are going to say that sex work is not a legitimate way of earning money and that's why it's not advertised in job centres – because actually there is an acceptance that vulnerable people who wouldn't otherwise choose to do sex work, if it's advertised in job centres, it's given a legitimacy by the state and then the state has a reason to say, do you know what, umm we'll withdraw your child benefit, we'll withdraw your Universal Credit, we'll give you less, because you know what, you have the ability to earn a living and to earn money from sex work and the fact you're not choosing to do that isn't our fault.

So it is about the greater good of society rather than one or two individuals who happen to be very lucky and happen to be able to take things on their terms – because life isn't like that for most people.

**Charlotte Rose:** I totally get what you're saying but in regards to this, one of my morals is not to cause harm to other people. I would never use my morals to cause harm to anybody. Your moralistic view is causing harm to sex workers because – just because you don't agree, it doesn't mean that you should dictate what somebody should and shouldn't – provided they're in a safe manner then your view and opinion mean absolutely nothing. It really doesn't.

**Caroline Farrow:** There's absolutely no evidence, Charlotte. And if –

**Charlotte Rose:** Evidence of what?

**Caroline Farrow:** You're going down a very dangerous line here –

**Charlotte Rose:** What evidence?

**Caroline Farrow:** You shouldn't have your views because they cause harm. There is no evidence –

**Charlotte Rose:** Your views cause harm.

**Caroline Farrow:** My views? I'm not dictating public policy. It –

**Charlotte Rose:** You're stating the protection of women and this view that you're dictating is causing harm. Because by stating views without actual evidence and facts is misconstruing the information and that causes harm to others.

**Caroline Farrow:** There is evidence and facts and when politicians and legislators and law makers are making decisions, they are going to go on public opinion and they are going on facts. You cannot say –

**Charlotte Rose:** [Talk over each other – impossible to hear]

**Chair:** There is a question here for the proposition: If you could make laws on sex work, how would you go about making it safer and more normalized?

**Charlotte Rose:** Yeah. Jerry, I want you to come in on this as well after me. Decriminalization is what we're hoping for and this is something that's really really serious. It's to be able to... Number one is to be able to give an opportunity to be safe at work. So at the moment an individual – as an individual – it's perfectly legal so I can go and work on my own in a property and it's perfectly legal.

Now the problem with that is that I'd have no safety around me other than the safety I do already. For me and many other sex workers out there, to have the ability to be able to work with somebody else that basically is massively important. It's very important.

At the moment, if two sex workers work together in a building or an apartment, it's classified as a brothel, which means that we're breaking the law. So to have decriminalization in place would give me the opportunity to be able to work with another person, keeping each other safer while we're working. Jerry.

**Jerry Barnett:** I'd add to that. Most people are aware that sex work is mostly legal in the UK, but the brothel law is one that makes people less safe. I'd pre-empt... We don't need a lot of change to the law – we have fairly good policing in the UK and as I understand it, the police are generally these days quite sympathetic to sex workers.

But what we're seeing is that where you do introduce restrictions to sex work in the law, then women become less safe.

And I do genuinely hear Caroline's point of view that she believes that for the greater good to not having sex work but unfortunately but you have to contrast that with people's rights to sell sex and people's rights to buy sex if they choose. And unfortunately, there isn't a greater good after taking away other people's rights that way.

**Charlotte Rose:** There's an article in the Human Rights Act that states that we have a right to earn, we have a right to privacy. So our human right is to earn and sex work is a choice that people choose to be able to earn and they have that right to do so.

**Caroline Farrow:** There is no human right to buy and sell sex. That's not defined in the UN Charter of Human Rights.

**Charlotte Rose:** But it is defined as you have a right to earn. You have a right to earn. You have a right to privacy. They are in there. Trust me.

**Caroline Farrow:** I understand that but your right to earn doesn't mean that you have a right to earn by, say, defrauding other people.

**Anna Fisher:** I just want to come back to something that Jerry said earlier that they can write off a lot of things that we have said as anecdotes and lacking in evidence. So our position is that prostitution can never be safe for women and the evidence is that the murders – so you said you didn't agree that the murders of prostitutes were the highest group. But I have a thing here from a senior police officer who gave evidence at a Home Affairs Select Committee inquiry in 2016 said: We've had 153 murders of prostitutes since 1990, which is the highest group of murders in any one category – so that gives the police cause for concern.

So our position is that prostitution can never be safe, nothing can make it safe and so we need to reduce it. And anything that normalizes it means it will increase – it will increase men's demand for it and it will become normalized and more women will be sucked in and more women will be hurt. So I would say to Charlotte, I believe also your position will cause harm

– like you say that to us. But also there is evidence that the more prostitution that happens, the more women are harmed.

**Chair:** I think we're going to end now on this last question from Twitter: You say sex work is only for male dominance but what about female dominance [?] you may still maintain the patriarchy.

**Caroline Farrow:** I would say that the numbers – and Anna will have the stats at her finger tips more than I do on this one – the numbers of women who use sex work or male prostitutes are miniscule and minute and men aren't taking the same kind of physical risks as women are when they choose to be male prostitutes.

Yes, there's always a risk, if you meet up with a stranger in an intimate situation, you know, but there are always risk factors. But actually, when you're talking about sex with a stranger because there is a difference between men and women – certainly in terms of male strength.

Most of the time, men are able to physically dominate women and also men... the offence of rape is unwanted penetration by a penis. So women are not physically able to rape – they just can't whereas men legally can.

So I cannot see that the notion of male prostitutes somehow helping female empowerment really washes. And it's interesting as well. A very old friend of mine I was chatting him to the other day and OK Jerry won't like this, this is an anecdote, and they were telling me about – not a Catholic friend – they were telling me about their experience on dating sites and even on some of these adult dating sites where they're looking for hookups and things. And it's really interesting because the women often say that they want – to be very crude – to be fucked and no strings attached sex and he said that's rarely the case with many of the women you meet on these sites. Women who claim that they only want sex really want whatever comes with it.

OK, that's an anecdote, generalizing, but I don't think the evidence shows that female sex workers, or male sex workers is doing anything for female empowerment.

**Chair:** I'm now going to ask the proposition to wrap up with their two-minute speech and to ask the opposition to get ready to do theirs in a bit.

**Charlotte Rose:** OK. I don't know how long this is – I've just been taking notes. The unfortunate thing about the opposition is that they always refer to about trafficking and coercion and you've got to be reminded that it's a very different subject. We're talking about sex work.

The opposition are often saying that it's not safe but there are supporting businesses that help us to be safe. Ugly Mugs is there. Fan Baits is there. But the only way to be truly safe is for the industry to be decriminalized.

The opposition has talked about prostitution having a high murder rate but those murder rates are highest in areas that have been criminalized. If it were decriminalized, we wouldn't have any of this as New Zealand has proven.

When the opposition talk about statistics – there are no real statistics. If you want to know what's happening in sex work, then ask a sex worker and not a politician.

Sex work is a job just like any other, think builders are using their bodies, think of actors playing a different role all the time. And if consent has not been given, this is not sex work. Forced sex work is against the law – it is not sex work.

I told you what my job consists of – does this not sound like work to you? To come back, sex work is 80% admin before the actual act itself.

I love sex. I enjoy spending time with many different people and in different places and different tools for the job. Just because you have a moral judgement against the work I do, it doesn't mean you should delegitimize what I do.

It is people like Caroline that cause danger and that put women at risk. She is not seeing the bigger picture. She doesn't help.

Again, the people arguing have never done sex work. They've never felt the empowerment or liberation of choosing which vibrator they're going to use tonight – or which strap-on the client is going to get – and they will get.

Only you can decide what you want to do for work. Don't let anybody else choose it for you. Sex work is work. Simple.

**Anna Fisher:** I can't see Caroline so maybe I should just go ahead.

RH Tawney, the economic historian, famously said, "Freedom for the pike is death for the minnows."

This is a metaphor for the central tenet of social democracy that freedom is not possible without equality, that inequality is a barrier to freedom, and true freedom resides in the community rather than the individual.

This is the understanding that underpins parking restrictions, speed limits in built up areas, the smoking ban in pubs, etc.

If we want an ethical society, we must accept some limits on our behaviour and that as a collective we have a responsibility for everyone, including the very old and young, the disabled, recent migrants, and those who are disadvantaged and have the fewest options.

It's not possible to understand prostitution without looking at the social, economic and political inequality between men and women, adults and youth, rich and poor, white people and people of colour, and at the role that prostitution has in maintaining these systemic inequalities.

Prostitution cannot be understood as “consensual sexual activity”. For sex to be consensual, it must be desired by both parties. In prostitution, the man pays precisely because the woman does not desire it. He buys the use of her body and her flattery. This confirms his manhood and her second-class status. This is closer to slavery than real work.

Just as the freedom of the majority to move around in safety supersedes the individual “freedom” to drive fast and dangerously, so the freedom of women and girls to not be subjected to prostitution supersedes the “freedom” of men to engage in it.

That is why prostitution cannot be considered ‘real work.’

**Note:** Due to technical difficulties there was no vote on the proposal.