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EXPERT COMMENT: After Keith Vaz: why the Home Affairs Select Committee's prostitution inquiry must continue

[Mary Laing](#), Senior lecturer in Criminology at Northumbria, writes about the legal system regarding escort industry for *The Conversation*.

Keith Vaz [stood down on September 6](#) as chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee after an article in the [Sunday Mirror](#) claimed he'd paid two male escorts for sex – Vaz said that he would [refer the allegations to his solicitor](#).

I wouldn't usually care about the sex lives of our MPs but when this happened, Vaz was chairing an [inquiry](#) by the committee on prostitution. His alleged actions caused uproar from both liberal and radical feminists and questions have been asked about [where the inquiry should go from here](#).

Launched in January, the inquiry published its [interim report](#) in July. It caused quite a stir. Its terms of reference included examining if criminal sanction should continue to apply more to sex workers than clients – essentially whether the purchase of sex should be criminalised. It also set out to examine the implications of the Crown Prosecution Service's recognition of prostitution as "violence against women" and the impacts of the Modern Slavery Act 2015 on trafficking.

Alongside this it is examining whether legal reforms are needed to assist services helping sex workers leave the sex industry, if people should be discouraged from purchasing of sex, and whether the ways in which "exploiters" are held to account could be increased. Some argued the terms of reference were [biased](#) towards criminalising the purchase of sex, and the so-called "Nordic Model" under which purchasing sex is illegal.

A much-needed inquiry

The inquiry is crucial in England and Wales because of the mess of [current laws](#) regulating the sex industry. For example, it is legal for consenting, individual adults to exchange sex for pay in a private, non-public space. Yet, it is not legal for sex workers to operate together indoors, which despite being one of the safer ways to work, potentially carries some of the heaviest criminal sanctions. Soliciting the purchase of sex in public is an offence, as is loitering or soliciting for the purpose of prostitution, meaning some of the most marginalised sex workers are criminalised. It is illegal to pay for the services of a “prostitute subject to force” and there are a host of sanctions against violence, coercion and trafficking.

The committee received over 250 written [submissions](#) and also took verbal testimony. As a self-confessed sex work policy geek (during my PhD in 2006 I could quote sections of Home Office prostitution policy by heart) I contributed to several written submissions. I also did a [survey](#) with [National Ugly Mugs](#), a national organisation seeking to prevent violence against sex workers, asking members about their views on what the inquiry was investigating.

So I was intrigued about the inquiry’s outcome. Given the inquiry’s terms of reference, the recommendations were surprising: soliciting should not be an offence, laws should enable sex workers to share premises for safety, and previous convictions or cautions for prostitution should be deleted. In addition, the MPs recommended that sanctions tackling exploitation, coercion and control should be strengthened. Given the previous hard-line in Home Office policy that prostitution-must-be-reduced-no-matter-what, the progressive, evidence-based recommendations placing sex workers’ health and safety at the centre were welcomed by sex workers and allies.

Mixed reaction

The [Sex Worker Open University](#), which advocates for rights for sex workers and decriminalisation of the sex industry, [said](#) it was “a giant step forward for sex workers’ rights in the UK”. The escort, campaigner and blogger [Laura Lee](#), described it as a “very exciting time for sex workers’ rights”.

Others rejected the recommendations, continuing to campaign for the Nordic Model. The campaign group [End Demand](#) welcomed the decriminalisation of sex workers themselves, but argued for a “three-pronged approach” to tackling prostitution (defined as sexual exploitation) by decriminalising sex

workers, criminalising clients and providing exit services for sex workers. They do not state what should happen to sex workers who don't wish to exit sex work.

In a critique of the report, another lobby group called Nordic Model Now [requested that](#) the submissions calling for the Nordic Model should be re-read “with an open mind”. After the allegations emerged about Keith Vaz, the same organisation [protested](#) outside Portcullis House in Westminster, chanting a rhyme about his sex purchasing to the tune of “Build a Bonfire”. They have asked for the report be thrown out.

The work must go on

So what will the outcome be? The July report is interim, and officially the inquiry is ongoing. Importantly and pragmatically, this is not about Vaz. It's about the rights of sex workers to health, safety and public protection, and having a robust legal system which recognises and prioritises these. It's about ensuring that those who need support to leave the sex industry have it, and that exploiters and trafficking – recognised as distinct to paid sex between consenting adults – are appropriately targeted.

In 2015, Northern Ireland criminalised the purchase of sex. [No-one has been prosecuted under this law](#), but [hate-fuelled attacks](#) committed against sex workers are evident, and have taken place since the law was enacted. The report and recommendations were [the outcome](#) of a committee as a whole, based on a thorough review of evidence submitted by many sex workers, academics, experts, organisations and varied feminist voices. Listening to these voices is what matters. They must not be silenced.

This article was originally published in The Conversation. Read the [original article](#).

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