

Chairperson's Statement

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Chairperson of Ruhama



In 2015, Ruhama worked with hundreds of women affected by prostitution & sex trafficking. This is not a measure of success. It is a measure of need. The women who come to Ruhama do so because they have decided they need some help. They need practical help, help to change their lives, and often to deal with the harmful personal effects of being sold, again and again, for the sexual gratification of others.

Ruhama began its work 26 years ago as a small outreach service to women on the streets of Dublin. We still provide that service. It might be a cup of tea, a chat, a step inside from the rain and cold. Or it might be that the woman who comes to "The Van" wants help to change or improve her life, to engage in counselling or avail of the other holistic supports that Ruhama offers. The "Van" provides a non-judgemental safe space, offering further support, if that is what she herself decides she wants.

Over the years the services provided by Ruhama have evolved, in response to the changing needs of women and girls affected by prostitution. This report gives a picture of the services that have developed in response to the needs of the women we meet.

Some of our services are in support of meeting those basic needs of everyone in society – supports to get a job, a home, a family life, self-esteem. For women who have been prostituted, being able to meet these basic needs can sometimes be particularly complex.

Prostitution in Ireland has evolved over the years. We live in an increasingly globalised and technology enabled world. We can buy anything on the internet. Women can now be bought and sold on-line, virtually anywhere, and any time.

Women affected by prostitution are now less likely to be on the streets, and more likely to be in indoor prostitution, ie brothels. A brothel in contemporary Ireland may be an apartment in any residential development, a house in any estate, in any city, town or village in the country. Women are commonly accessed by buyers through third parties via websites or mobile phone numbers. This is a highly organised business, often operated by transnational organised crime.

The contemporary world of prostitution can involve trafficking, internationally and nationally, and the ability of the woman involved to take full control of her own life is not always easy. A woman in a brothel may have been brought to Ireland under false pretences, may have had her papers taken, may be moved on a regular basis

around the country and be advertised online with different nationalities and identities. Or she may, for complex reasons, simply feel that there is no alternative, or no choice and no chance of a life outside of prostitution.

Ruhama has worked in partnership, with other NGOs, the Department of Justice & Equality, the European Commission and An Garda Síochána, and our own service users to create an awareness among affected women, that there are free dedicated support services available to them, which provide health, advocacy and many other forms of assistance.

The "REACH project" was not only a joint project to reach out to women and girls who are trafficked, or vulnerable to being trafficked, but also to reach out to men and boys to inform them about the issue. Research shows that the vast majority of men in Ireland do not buy women for sex and never will. Nonetheless, the minority of men who do buy sex are fuelling a multi-million euro business to the benefit of organised criminals, rather than the benefit of the women who are trafficked and prostituted.

Ruhama's focus is the hundreds of women who engage with us each year. Ruhama also recognises that there is a need for systemic change to ensure that exploitation of women through the commercialisation of sex is minimised. Ruhama believes that a society, which recognises prostitution as a product of inequality and exploitation, and which responds accordingly, will create the most effective approach to minimise the harm of the sex trade, by providing a legislative framework which recognises the right not to be exploited. The organisation engages in work to advocate for legislation and policies from a human rights based perspective.

Today, we have the opportunity to address the problem of exploitation and trafficking systemically, by addressing the matter of the purchase of a woman's consent to sex.

We welcome the initiation of the Sexual Offences Bill 2015 by the Minister for Justice & Equality, and hope that, like other countries which have enacted similar legislation such as Sweden, Norway, Northern Ireland and France the Government will enact this Bill, sending out the clear message that it is not acceptable in our society for one person to buy out or to sell sexual access to the body of another.