

Advocacy, Communications and Training - Changing hearts and minds

In addition to the provision of our frontline services, in 2015 Ruhama also made significant strides in tackling the issues of prostitution and sex trafficking from a broader advocacy perspective, addressing the conditions and institutions that allow the sexual exploitation of vulnerable women and girls to thrive.

This work was carried out at both a national and an international level and involved a host of influencing activities, including:

- Raising awareness of the harms of prostitution and trafficking amongst specific audiences, and the general public at large
- Advocating for legislative and policy change that tackles the demand that drives the sex trade, whilst addressing the vulnerabilities of those exploited within it
- Supporting survivors of prostitution and sex trafficking to raise their voices against exploitation
- Providing training and other resources to key professionals who are in a position to support and respond empathetically to vulnerable persons involved in prostitution.

Some highlights of our advocacy work in 2015 are outlined below.

Influencing legislation at home and abroad

2015 was a pivotal year for the progress of Ireland's Sexual Offences Bill, which includes a range of legal instruments to tackle sexual exploitation, including outlawing the purchase of sex with penalties for those who profit from prostitution.

These are measures that Ruhama has campaigned long and hard for, most recently as a core member of the Turn Off the Red Light (TORL) Campaign.

TORL is a broad-based coalition with a membership of over 70 organisations spanning the NGO sector, trade union movement, and civil society.

During 2015 we worked closely with our TORL partners to ensure that as well as tackling demand, the Sexual Offences Bill also includes the repeal of the offence of soliciting for prostitution – a key measure that recognises the vulnerabilities of the vast majority of those who sell sex, and the injustice of criminalising them.

Having promoted the Bill through our media work, amongst our supporters and allies, and behind the scenes with key political figures it is now very close to fruition – by the end of 2015 it had almost completed its passage through the Seanad and ever closer to becoming a reality in law in 2016.

Given the global nature of the issues we work on and the fact that prostitution is an international trade, Ruhama also strives to ensure that we can extend our influence and expertise to other jurisdictions that are also focusing on these issues.

During 2015 we made a number of submissions and undertook a number of actions in this respect, including:

- Our formal response to Northern Ireland's Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety on their consultation Leaving Prostitution: A strategy for help and support
- Our formal response to the consultation on Scotland's Prostitution Law Reform Bill, 2015
- A joint submission (with our partners Doras Luimní and the Immigrant Council of Ireland) to the European Commission on the need for an independent National Rapporteur in the State's fight against human trafficking
- Our joint submission with partners to the Anti-Human Trafficking Unit in response to the draft publication of the 2nd National Action Plan to Combat Trafficking of Human Beings
- Furthering our advocacy goals via our active participation in the European Union Civil Society Platform Against Trafficking in Human Beings and the European Women's Lobby Observatory on Violence Against Women
- Hosting a briefing session for MEPs as members of the European Parliament FEMM Committee (Women's Rights and Gender Equality) on the frontline, policy and advocacy work of Ruhama.

All of our submissions are available on Ruhama's website www.ruhama.ie