

## **PRESS RELEASE**

### **Ruhama strongly welcomes legislation to criminalise the sex buyer, and decriminalise those selling sex.**

Ruhama today welcomes the passage of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2015. As the frontline service directly supporting women affected by prostitution and sex trafficking for 28 years, Ruhama has long advocated for legislation to focus on the demand of sex buyers as a key measure to curb expansion of the exploitative sex trade in Ireland. The organisation has also advocated for many years for the repealing of the offence for soliciting for prostitution to give the clear social message that no person should be criminalised for their own exploitation.

Ruhama CEO Sarah Benson commented: “We commend the Tánaiste and Minister for Justice Frances Fitzgerald for taking landmark measures to address the demand of sex buyers as the group directly responsible for perpetuating the commercial sex trade. Without demand there would be no supply. We witness every day the ugly consequences of prostitution and sex trafficking, where the most vulnerable women and girls from across the globe are targeted to be used in Ireland’s brothels. At the same time, in removing the offence for soliciting, the spirit of this law is clear: those in prostitution should not be criminalised.”

Sarah Benson continued: “Ruhama is now committed to focusing on the implementation of the law and to ensure that the intended spirit of the legislation to protect those exploited in prostitution is upheld. We will continue to work closely and positively with the Gardaí, as we have been in recent years, in order to advocate for the targeting of pimps, traffickers and now sex buyers, while ensuring a more consistent & compassionate approach to any person selling sex.”

“As a service provider to women affected by prostitution we are committed to continuing to offer our very broad range of free, confidential and non-judgmental services, which include supports to exit prostitution if that is what a woman wishes to do. We will also continue to develop and enhance our partnership with the existing dedicated sexual health services to promote sexual health for those who remain actively involved in prostitution.”

In conclusion, Sarah Benson said: “This law is the culmination of many years advocacy, in conjunction with a diverse range of other NGOs, survivor activists and civil society organizations who have been members of the Turn off the Red Light Campaign. The process that has resulted in the passing of this law has been incredibly rigorous with a comprehensive consultation by the Justice Committee, hundreds of submissions, public hearings, broad media and parliamentary debate and discussion - with huge Dáil & Seanad majorities supporting the passage of the Bill. There is now a strong social message enshrined in Irish law: it is not okay for one person to buy access to another person for sex. Bodily autonomy is a human right – buying sex is not. This measure is a vital step forward for gender equality in Ireland at a time when women’s human right to live free from violence and exploitation are under attack in other parts of the world.”

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