

Hopes grow for prostitution law reform

New South Australian Legislative Council may be open to approve Nordic model laws in Australian first, writes Amanda Brohier

A number of Members of Parliament have been elected who are deeply concerned about the welfare of vulnerable women in prostitution. This gives hope for the introduction of an Equality or Nordic Model Bill of Prostitution Law Reform for the first time in Australian Parliament.

This will be a marked change from the decriminalisation model that was introduced into the South Australian Legislative Council by the Hon. Tammy Franks MLC in 2020. Her â??Statutes Amendment (Repeal of Sex Work Offences) Bill 2020â?• has now lapsed and will progress no further.

The process which preceded the lapsing of the Greens-sponsored Bill was the referral to a select committee of the Legislative Council to inquire into and report on the Bill. During March 2021, the committee advertised its inquiry in the *Advertiser*, InDaily and all regional newspapers with an invitation to make written submissions or register their interest in appearing before the committee to present evidence.

The committee received 148 submissions of which 71 were for the Bill, 74 were against the Bill and 3 which stated no position. In addition, 420 emails opposing the Bill were submitted via one click politics. From 31 May, 2021, the committee heard evidence from 29 interested groups, most of whom had submitted written submissions.

The investigation of the committee was published on 16 February 2022 and it stated that a majority position could not be established and the committee was not able to make any recommendations in regard to the passing of the Bill. This is an important result because it shows that there is considerable evidence against and opposition to decriminalization.

Women Ending Exploitation by Prostitution (WEEP) presented evidence regarding the lived experience of prostitution survivors. This evidence addressed three areas common to survivors:

- recovery from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder
- recovery from drug and/or alcohol addiction
- recovery from physical harm.

The work of WEEP now continues in supporting the establishment of and advocating for a refuge for women who desire to exit prostitution. The establishment of such a refuge will marry with hoped for legislative change to bring in a Nordic or Equality Model Bill.

The Nordic or Equality Model whereby the seller of sexual services (usually the woman) is decriminalised and the buyer of the services (usually the man) is criminalised, represents more than just legislative change.

This law reform is an holistic approach encompassing social and economic support for prostituted persons as well as public education campaigns about the harms of prostitution and trafficking.

Since 2020, a number of groups including WEEP have been working to develop a business model for the â??Coming Homeâ?• project. This has been modelled on the work of Samaritan Women, Institute for Shelter Care, who have developed many successful refuges in the United States.

The heart of the project is to offer a pathway for women in prostitution to re-integrate into society, through establishing and providing a safe shelter. There are no alternate facilities available in this state and very few nationally. The shelter is for women who are suffering physical and mental health problems, caused by the trauma and abuse in prostitution.

As they desire to come out of the sex industry, â??Coming Homeâ?• is designed for a live-in period of 6-12 months, providing programs for healing, restoration, empowerment, and job training.

The shelter and all programs are planned to be operated by paid staff and volunteers utilising in-house and outsourced professional services to support, nurture and to train these women. This will require significant funding and we are actively seeking donations both for the establishment of the facility and its ongoing running costs.

If anyone is interested in being involved with this important work or supporting it financially please contact me at the WEEP email address. We are currently working on a website which we hope to have up and running in the next couple of months.

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Date Created
May 18, 2022