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*Criminalising the payment for sex in Northern Ireland: Sketching the contours of a moral panic*

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Introduction

Sex work or prostitution – the term varies depending on one's ideological position on the nature of commercial sex (Weitzer, 2011a) – has once again been thrust into the spotlight in Northern Ireland in the aftermath of the Northern Ireland Assembly's decision to legislate for Lord Morrow's *Human Trafficking & Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill* that includes a number of provisions to provide support to victims of human trafficking but controversially includes specific provisions to make it a criminal offence to 'pay for the sexual services of a prostitute'.<sup>1</sup> This particular clause is modelled on the so-called 'Nordic Model' of criminalisation of demand<sup>2</sup> that it is argued will reduce the opportunities for commercial sex and by extension the potential for human trafficking for sexual exploitation (see Ekberg, 2004). In many respects, however, Lord Morrow's Bill is a symptom of more general anxieties that have been developing across the UK and globally for the past decade and a half. These relate to human trafficking for forced labour, but particularly for sexual exploitation, that collectively have been referred to as the 'modern day slave trade' (Bales, 1999). The discussion that follows has two aims. First, I analyse the contours of the trafficking debate in Northern Ireland and note how this has been refracted almost exclusively through the lens of sexual exploitation. I argue that at one level the prostitution-trafficking debate in Northern Ireland bears all the hallmarks of Cohen's famous articulation of a moral panic (Cohen, 1972), insofar as official pronouncements, media reports and the claims of advocacy groups all amplify the size of the problem that bears little relationship to its actual occurrence (discussed below). Further, since as David Garland argues we need to examine the *symptomatic* nature of such panics (Garland, 2008: 11), I suggest that debates around sex trafficking and prostitution point to a host of other issues around the nature of female sexuality

and subjectivity in what remains a very socially and culturally conservative society (Tonge et al, 2014; Meredith, 2015) but also to a sense of ontological insecurity (c.f. Laing, 1973) among a section of the Protestant / unionist community that has seen its traditional value system as under attack in recent years.

Second, commentators are now well attuned to the variety and complexity of commercial sex both within and between jurisdictions (O’Connell Davidson, 2002; O’Neill, 2010; Scoular, 2010; Sanders, O’Neill & Pitcher, 2009; Weitzer, 2011a; Mai, 2011). However, while differences in these organisational dynamics are central, considerably less attention has been paid to the ways that anti-prostitution and abolitionist campaigns and movements are specifically grounded in local political cultures. In terms of how the debate about prostitution and trafficking has been framed in Northern Ireland what we are witnessing is rather unusual, at least in Europe: Namely (a) the role of faith groups on the Christian right<sup>3</sup> in driving these campaigns; (b) and relatedly, the establishment of a strategic and highly visible partnership between a section of the radical feminist movement *and* the Christian right. Of course, as US scholars have documented (Bernstein, 2012, 2010; Campbell & Zimmerman, 2014; Cojocaru, 2015; Zimmerman, 2012, 2011) these strategic alliances have been forged in the United States for quite some time around the prostitution and trafficking issue, but in Europe anti-prostitution debates continue to be framed largely from within a secular feminist paradigm; albeit one that focuses on sexual violence rather than sexual rights (Kapur, 2007: 224). Certainly a review of anti-prostitution campaigns in Europe suggests that a religious-moral emphasis on what Garland has termed the ‘politics of sin’ (Garland, 2008: 16) is not particularly prevalent.<sup>4</sup>

### Methodology

This paper is derived from a subset of the data obtained from a larger funded study<sup>5</sup> of the policing and regulation of the commercial sex industry in four European cities that have different regulatory models in place. These cities included Belfast (Northern Ireland), Manchester (England), Prague (Czech Republic) and Berlin (Germany). The research took place during 2013-14 and included semi-structured interviews with a range of stakeholder groups and (where possible) ethnographic observations of a number of settings where sexual commerce is conducted (e.g. street-based solicitation areas and indoor commercial establishments).

The discussion that follows is based on aspects of the research conducted in Belfast. Since the timing of the research coincided with political debates around the introduction of Lord Morrow’s *Human Trafficking & Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims) Bill*

consent interviews were conducted with representatives from all the main Northern Ireland political parties: the Democratic Unionist Party, the Ulster Unionist Party, Sinn Féin, the Social Democratic and Labour Party, the Alliance Party and the Green Party. In addition, interviews were also undertaken with Belfast city council officials to discuss on-street prostitution in the city, two representatives from the Police Service of Northern Ireland (henceforth PSNI) who are involved with the force's Organised Crime Unit (which covers prostitution and trafficking issues) and representatives from the NI Department of Justice that oversees prostitution policy in the region. Interviews were also conducted with quasi-government agencies such as the Northern Ireland Council for Ethnic Minorities, as well as a range of NGOs including Migrant Help, Women's Aid, Amnesty International, the Northern Ireland Law Centre and No More Traffik that have been involved in debates around prostitution and trafficking in Northern Ireland. A medical professional from the Belfast Health and Social Care Trust that provides outreach services to street-based sex workers in the city (mainly in terms of sexual health advice and testing) via the Belfast Commercial Sex Worker Service was interviewed and who was able to provide demographic information on this cohort of (mainly female) street sellers.

Unlike the other cities in the study Belfast has a comparatively small street-based sector for sexual commerce and as I suggest below this has largely been displaced indoors to private residences or hotels. Consequently, the researcher obtained access to one of the largest advertising websites for escorts in the UK and Ireland. Four managers and one senior IT consultant who does contract work for the company agreed to be interviewed. I was also given anonymised data from the company about the numbers of male and female escorts working in both parts of Ireland, their age, nationality, home location, expressed sexuality and other demographic characteristics for the period 2009-2013. Six sex workers (online escorts) and one sex worker activist also agreed to be interviewed for the Belfast research. The sex workers were identified via a snowball sampling method following the initial interview with the sex worker activist. Triangulation was used to cross-verify data between the various sources and data analysis was organised around the 'constant comparison' method that is standard in qualitative studies (e.g. see Fram, 2013). All the interviews took place with the respondent's consent and under the guidelines for ethical research issued by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC, 2015) and the researcher's university. A written statement outlining the aims and purpose of the research was given to each respondent at the beginning of the interview. Interviews were digitally recorded with the respondent's permission and only one respondent (from a political party) stated that he did not want to be recorded. Since

respondents were given a guarantee of anonymity I do not mention names but refer only to their organisation or employment role in the discussion that follows.

Since the thrust of this paper relates to the topic of moral panics and the ways that information about sexual commerce in Northern Ireland has been communicated via a range of official and media sources this paper relies heavily on an analysis of published and documentary sources although quotes from interview respondents are used to highlight a number of key points. I quote extensively from newspaper coverage of the prostitution and trafficking issue drawing on two of Northern Ireland's largest circulation newspapers: *The Belfast Telegraph* and the *News Letter*. In addition, coverage of these issues has also been dealt with extensively by the BBC on its regional news website.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, given that my discussion seeks to evaluate how the debate surrounding prostitution and trafficking has been constructed via official channels I critically examine a number government reports and publications. In particular, I draw heavily on parliamentary debates in the Northern Ireland Assembly around Lord Morrow's Bill, as well as the minutes of written and oral evidence from the NI Committee for Justice in relation to this issue. These have been reproduced in *Hansard*.<sup>7</sup>

#### Trafficking, the sex industry and moral panics

Both the driving force for Lord Morrow's Act – the perceived existence of widespread trafficking for sexual exploitation - and the legislative and police response to it, resonates with the classic formulation of a moral panic developed by Stan Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics* (Cohen, 1972). Cohen famously outlined his theory of moral panics as occurring in three stages: First, is the 'discovery' of an event that had hitherto been undiscovered. In this case it is 'trafficking' that emerged from the wilderness to become a major feature of public discourse in the past decade and a half to now featuring prominently in official policy announcements; a prolific growth in NGOs dedicated to eradicating it, as well providing the staple diet of media reportage and coverage in its more sensationalistic variants, (Davies, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2011; Pickering & Ham, 2014; Weitzer, 2011a). Of course trafficking is a horrendous activity which no-one could legitimately claim to be *for*. But this in itself has often stifled critical voices and reflections about the nature of the phenomenon (Campbell & Zimmerman, 2014: 146). Certainly, while many commentators are in no doubt that trafficking is taking place there is less agreement on the scale or size of the problem or indeed whether trafficking needs to be seen in the context of other structural processes such as labour mobility and migration, sexuality and gender (Agustín, 2007; Bernstein, 2010, 2012; Kapur, 2007; Pickering & Ham, 2014). Similarly, there are wide cross-cultural variations in how the

phenomenon is perceived (Agustín, 2007). Trafficking like organised crime is a hidden activity and difficult to measure empirically. Estimates on the extent of trafficking vary and as I suggest below there are often huge discrepancies between the estimates of advocacy groups (e.g. see Walk Free Foundation, 2014) and the numbers of victims identified by national law enforcement agencies (Weitzer, 2011a; Huschke et al, 2014). Indeed, the scholar, legal expert and anti-trafficking advisor to the United Nations Anne Gallagher, has written a scathing critique of the methodology deployed by the Walk Free Foundation which in its ‘Global Slavery Index’ attempts to provide a quantitative assessment of trafficking – what it terms ‘modern day slavery’. As Gallagher argues:

...Less forgivable are the weaknesses that mar the substance of the Index and compromise its findings: a mysterious, inconsistently applied methodology, a raft of unverified assumptions and multiple, critical errors of fact and logic. Even the basic unit of measurement of “modern slavery” is flawed: the definition is self-created, and bizarrely changes from one year to the next (Gallagher, 2014).

As Cohen (1972) makes clear moral panics often have a symptomatic quality; a point that Garland (2008) notes has been lost in some of its more recent articulations. In this sense a panic need not necessarily be related to the original event, rather it can be read as a metaphor for contemporary troubles and a symbolic device through which a range of societal anxieties are articulated and expressed (see Sparks, 1992). These anxieties are no doubt related to the political, social and cultural context within which they occur and in the UK more generally it is debatable whether public concerns were actually prompted by ‘trafficking’ (i.e. the forced movement of people) or whether they articulated more nebulously with concerns about immigration and immigration policy and the perception that the UK was being ‘swamped’ by immigrants (Fitzgerald, 2011). In the UK and Europe it is perhaps no coincidence that ‘trafficking’ entered public and media discourse at about the same time as the European Union (EU) was expanding its borders and the free movement of people particularly from those states that comprised the former Soviet bloc (Davies, 2009; Fitzgerald, 2011; Mai, 2011).

In Ireland, the once roaring but now muted Celtic Tiger economy in the south of the country and the economic dividends of the peace process in Northern Ireland, resulted in extremely high levels of inward migration to both parts of Ireland. This in the main, was typified by migrants from the former Soviet bloc who came to work in the service, agriculture and construction sectors; but also, as I outline below, to work in the sex industry (often moving between Belfast, Dublin and other cities on the island). In a rather curious statement to the Northern Ireland Committee for Justice, the Democratic Unionist Party’s (DUP)<sup>8</sup> Mr Jim Wells

seems to conflate trafficking with *legal* migration and claims that even those who migrate to Northern Ireland legally will find their way into the underground sex economy:

...the vast majority of those who are trafficked come into the United Kingdom legally. They are not smuggled in. They are brought in with work visas for things such as hairdressing, catering, cooking, etc. Once they get in, they are immediately hijacked at the airport and locked in brothels. That is where the vast majority of women end up. The men end up in gangs working in agriculture (Mr Jim Wells cited in Committee for Justice, 2012).

Consequently, the DUP have called for stricter immigration controls on the movement of certain groups of people to the UK (Committee for Justice, 2012). But it is the presence of migrant Eastern European sex workers in particular, who have animated politicians and campaign groups on both sides of the Irish border.

Second, as Cohen notes (Cohen, 1972) there is the ‘fanning the flames’ dimension, where advocacy coalitions, lobbyists, politicians and ‘expert’ opinion-formers establish that the event is even more serious than first thought and represents just the ‘tip of the iceberg’. The PSNI appears to believe that no-one would want to work in the sex industry voluntarily and have coined the mantra ‘rape for profit’ to describe prostitution in Northern Ireland (Collins, 2012). Similarly, the force has provided statistics to suggest that prostitution is Northern Ireland’s largest commercial enterprise with income estimated at £35 million per annum (News Letter, 2012a) while other PSNI figures suggest that Northern Irish males spend £500,000 per week on sex (BBC, 2011a) – but these are claims that cannot be substantiated. To reach these figures we would need to know exactly how many sex workers were operating in the jurisdiction, how much they charged, how many men avail of sexual services out of the total male population, and with what frequency they did so. Yet these figures were repeated unproblematically as ‘fact’ in a recent BBC Spotlight documentary (BBC, 2012). Indeed, the PSNI appear to operate under the assumption that *all* sexual commerce in Northern Ireland involves trafficking and exploitation at some level. It has claimed for example, that Northern Ireland is the biggest sex trafficking hub, with the highest demand for commercial sexual services in all of Europe and the UK (BBC, 2011b). Again, however, such claims fly in the face of the research evidence and as we shall see the commercial sex sector in Northern Ireland is comparatively small both in relation to other UK jurisdictions but also internationally.

The ‘fanning the flames’ dimension also often involves a degree of net-widening with a range of activities now added to the original ‘problem’, and furthermore through repeated media and official representation a ‘lumping in’ of a range of discrete activities that may not be

related. Thus for example, some government reports (Committee for Justice, 2011; Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2011) link trafficking not only to sexual exploitation but also to a myriad range of activities including organised crime, international terrorism and drugs, paramilitary violence and extortion rackets.

More generally, in Northern Ireland the issue of trafficking has been almost exclusively refracted through the lens of sexual exploitation. This of course has a long history and the linking of sexual slavery to prostitution was commonplace in the various campaigns that have their roots in the Victorian era, but in particular, that of the social purity movement and the 'white slave trade'. Social purity activism was 'rooted in assumptions about women's "natural" moral nature as pure, pious and submissive' (Zimmerman, 2011: 570) and the goal was to eradicate perceived vices including prostitution and structuring society into the model favoured by Protestant evangelicals. The belief that 'white slavery' was occurring allowed the moral purity movement to gain traction in Europe (Grittner, 1990) and as Zimmerman (2011: 570) argues, 'the discursive foundations of "white slavery" remain remarkably intact in present-day depictions of human trafficking'. White slavery activists believed that white European women and girls (usually depicted as 'virgins'), were routinely abducted by non-western men or subalterns and spirited out of the country for depraved sexual practices (Cree, Clapton & Smith, 2012; Grittner, 1990).

What we are seeing currently in Northern Ireland is an outplaying of the white slavery myth in geographical reverse. Indeed, much of the debate on the trafficking issue in Northern Ireland has been underpinned by less than discreet racial overtones.<sup>9</sup> Rather than women and children being abducted from Northern Ireland and sent to overseas destinations the subaltern 'Other' held to be responsible for sexual trafficking activities in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is replaced in the current context by the east European 'Other' (see generally Andrijasevic, 2007). This principally involves 'gangs' of men who move to Northern Ireland to sexually exploit and enslave local women (Londonderry Sentinel, 2012) or alternatively Eastern European sex workers who tempt the hard-working and otherwise morally pure Northern Irish male away from his wife and family. Indeed, Lord Morrow, the architect of the current law to criminalise the payment for sex has sent a stern message to any international pimp who might be thinking of relocating: 'Do not be sending your women here to Northern Ireland!' he has warned (Huffington Post, 2012). Current policy debates about the nature of trafficking in Northern Ireland are almost exclusively concerned with trafficking for sexual exploitation, which as I outline below, is then unproblematically conflated with prostitution in general (e.g. see Department of Justice, 2011).



Finally, this has led to the third stage in the formation of a moral panic that involves ‘cracking down hard from above’ and where law enforcement agencies and legislators seek to curry public favour and ‘get tough’ on whatever activity spawned the panic in the first place. In Northern Ireland we are currently in the midst of the third stage with the various legislative proposals proposed by Lord Morrow in emulation of the Nordic model, as well as a relentless crackdown on commercial sex by the PSNI including the ‘smashing’ of brothels and the arrest or immediate deportation of those involved in even consensual commercial sexual activities (see Belfast Telegraph, 2012). Of course, this ‘getting tough’ is not only the preserve of state officials and those in authority. In a reflection of what Bernstein (2012) has termed ‘carceral feminism’ one of the main women’s organisations in Northern Ireland - Women’s Aid – that promotes itself as having strong feminist credentials has enthusiastically advocated for Lord Morrow’s legislation and argued for stiff jail terms for those convicted of purchasing sex (Women’s Aid, 2013).

Cohen doesn’t have a fourth stage, but he does make the point that after Stage 3 the public can lose interest and the panic subsides, or alternatively it can branch off into another area whereby the cycle repeats itself. I return to aspects of Cohen’s thesis later in the discussion but first it is necessary to highlight how the issue of prostitution / sex trafficking has been dealt with in the mass media and by official agencies in Northern Ireland but also to provide an assessment of its scope and scale in order to assess whether the panic is justified.

### Fuelling the panic

In Northern Ireland, as elsewhere, the issue of trafficking and sexual exploitation has been foregrounded by a powerful constellation of lobbying and advocacy groups. Indeed, there has been a prolific growth in organisations that wish to eradicate trafficking (generally seen as sexual exploitation) across Northern Ireland including the Salvation Army, Evangelical Alliance, Migrant Help, Northern Ireland Law Centre, International Justice Mission, Invisible Traffik, CARE, Urban Angels, Soroptimist International, Community Faiths Forum, Barnardos, No More Traffik, Flourish, Freedom ACTS, Women’s Aid and so forth. A number of towns across Northern Ireland now have an active branch of ‘Active Communities Against Trafficking’ (ACT) including one in Newtownards launched by the Extreme World and Eastenders actor Ross Kemp. ACT is also affiliated to the faith group ‘Stop The Traffik’ that describes itself as ‘a global movement of individuals, communities and organisations fighting to prevent human trafficking around the world’.<sup>10</sup> Other Northern Ireland based organisations such as ‘No More Traffik’ provide what they term a ‘Trafficking 101’ on its website that

provides three columns of ‘facts’ for the uninitiated.<sup>11</sup> Of course, many of these ‘facts’ are simply opinions while others are impossible to substantiate. Nevertheless, they are endlessly recycled in the local media and are given substance by often inaccurate and misleading data from the PSNI and the Northern Ireland Department of Justice (e.g. see Department of Justice, 2011). Media outlets are apparently fed a diet of misinformation from the PSNI with a level of graphic detail that is bordering on the pornographic and which seems designed to titillate and revile in equal measure. For example, an article in the Irish edition of *The Daily Mirror* drawing upon information provided by the PSNI dramatically warns its readership that there will be ‘300,000 rapes of sex slaves in Northern Ireland every year’. The paper then goes on to provide a graphic point-by-point exposé of the life of a ‘sex slave’ (Poole, 2013):

*All victims of sexual trafficking are female*

*Most are 19 years old*

*Nearly all are virgins*

*Victims are locked in rented houses and told their families will be killed*

*All will have multiple abortions*

*All will pick up a sexually transmitted disease*

*Most will be required to perform anal sex without a condom*

*Each victim will be given food and alcohol*

*All will be assigned a pimp after a ‘pep talk’ then they will be gang raped*

*All money paid goes to gang bosses, the women make nothing*

*Many will have unprotected sex with a stranger at least 6 times a day*

*Many of the men who pay for sex in Northern Ireland are married or in a stable relationship*

*Men who pay for sex lead outwardly normal lives but have a dark secret.*

Of course we should not belittle the experience of anyone forced to undergo the horrific treatment described in the *Daily Mirror* but what is missing here is actual evidence. Stories such as these raise obvious questions about the relationship between the rhetoric / hysteria about the scale of the problem and the official response in terms of arrests, let alone prosecutions or convictions which simply looms too large for comfort. In any case, Northern Ireland already has fairly robust penalties in place to deal with sexual trafficking and exploitation. Since 2009 it is already an offence (punishable by a stiff jail term) to knowingly procure sexual services from a trafficked victim<sup>12</sup> while existing law rightfully prohibits sexual activity with someone who is underage or otherwise vulnerable. In fairness to the *Daily Mirror*

report mentioned above the PSNI needs to bear a significant degree of responsibility for hyping some of these stories. As Cree et al (2012) document in their analysis of child trafficking in the UK certain apocalyptic stories are provided by the police to local media and recycled by anti-trafficking advocates. In Northern Ireland a series of stories involving the ‘sex slave trade’ are apparently told by the PSNI to journalists, politicians and advocacy groups at anti-trafficking briefings. One in particular relates to a photograph of a door that had scratch marks on it that were alleged to have been made by a trafficked victim. This photograph has been discussed at several junctures in the Northern Ireland Assembly (Northern Ireland Assembly, 2013) and circulated widely in the Northern Irish media as ‘proof’ that trafficking for sexual exploitation is widespread. A news report in the *Irish Independent* describes the photograph:

A photograph showing how a woman forced into prostitution had tried to claw her way out of the room where she was being held in Northern Ireland was shown at a meeting of the Policing Board. The image was presented as a graphic illustration of the cost of human trafficking, as a senior officer said society needed to grasp the horror of the crime. [T]he officer said human trafficking was ‘modern day slavery’ and had to be tackled (*Irish Independent*, 2011).

Certainly, at face value this story is emotional and horrific. But what this account omits is the fact that *no* actual victim was discovered by the PSNI and it is simply assumed that the scratch marks were made by someone trafficked into prostitution. What caused the scratch marks, whether there was a victim and if so, whether ‘she’ was engaged in prostitution coercively or consensually, or engaged in prostitution at all is simply unknown. Nevertheless, such ‘survivor narratives’ (Cojocaru, 2015) are widespread in anti-trafficking campaigns and reflect a semiology of embedded meanings and the construction of the idealised female victim. Such narratives are always gendered and indeed some critical feminist commentators have highlighted their concerns at the increasingly graphic imagery used to illustrate and highlight anti-trafficking campaigns arguing that this often serves to bolster stereotypical constructions of femininity by eroticising and fetishizing the female subject. This is neatly encapsulated in the title of an academic article concerning representations of women in anti-trafficking campaigns: *Beautiful Dead Bodies* (Andrijasevic, 2007; see also Cojocaru, 2015).

While the PSNI have to take a share of responsibility for hyping some of the issues around prostitution and sex trafficking with the press, politicians and advocacy groups in some recent media comment the force has been much more circumspect in its pronouncements with one senior officer claiming in a Belfast newspaper that Lord Morrow’s Bill would be impossible to police (see Belfast Telegraph, 2013a). This of course may be due to the realisation that hyping

the situation carries its own risks in terms of not being able to deliver in terms of victims or arrests that in turn raise sceptical and awkward questions. Indeed, in their interviews with me PSNI officers were keen to emphasise that rates of prostitution in Northern Ireland are comparatively low in a broader UK context:

Compared to England prostitution doesn't have a very big presence here. When I worked in Belfast city centre I would say we devoted less than 1% of our time and resources to prostitution or prostitution related issues. We simply weren't getting the complaints. Now where I am in organised crime, which potentially takes in [sexual] trafficking, I would say that this would take up maybe 5% of our time and resources. So again I wouldn't say that it is a huge issue. I mean there are bigger issues out there (PSNI officer A, organised crime unit).

Well I suppose if you go back maybe ten or twelve years ago there was a bit more of a street scene around the city [Belfast], and there were certain parts of the city where you could have picked up a [sex] worker quite easily. That has all changed now with the Internet to the point where there is only a tiny street scene in the city. In terms of the Internet itself, my guess is that the majority of women are working independently but what I am concerned with in my day job is organised prostitution. I have no doubt that there are women who are forced or coerced into prostitution but I think you have to keep things in perspective. For lots of complicated reasons to do with religion and morality prostitution here simply doesn't exist on the same scope or scale as it does in England (PSNI officer B, organised crime unit).

### The size of the commercial sex sector in Northern Ireland

Given that trafficking is such an underground activity it is always going to be difficult to get an accurate handle on its nature and extent whether for sexual exploitation, forced labour or domestic servitude. In particular, there is often a disparity between the claims of NGOs, media reports and official data. Strangely, in spite of the current emphasis on trafficking for sexual exploitation research into prostitution in Northern Ireland has been sorely lacking. Aside from a historical account of prostitution in Belfast (McCormick, 2009) there have only been two academic studies of prostitution in the region: one commissioned by the NI Department of Justice (Huschke et al, 2014) and another undertaken by the present author (2014).

Certainly these recent analyses suggest that when considered in relation to other UK cities (London, Birmingham, Manchester, Glasgow) the size of the commercial sex sector in Belfast, and indeed Northern Ireland generally, is comparatively small (e.g. see Huschke et al, 2014; the author XXXXX). Of course, as a port city Belfast historically had a tradition of commercial sex and from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the now demolished Sailortown area of the docks was home to a number of establishments where both women and men negotiated business with sailors coming and going from the nearby ships (McCormick, 2009). However, the violent socio-political conflict that erupted in the late 1960s had a hugely disruptive effect on the bulk of

prostitution, particularly in Belfast; while the dangers of using public space, particularly at night, meant that a particularly active street-sector as found in many other UK cities was never established. Much commercial sex was displaced into indoor establishments (houses, hotels, apartments) while there is some, albeit anecdotal, evidence to suggest that loyalist paramilitary organisations were involved in organised prostitution rackets during the 1970s and 1980s (Dillon 1991). However, interviews conducted with the PSNI suggest that there is no evidence that paramilitary organisations (whether republican or loyalist) are currently involved in prostitution-related activities (Interviews with officers from PSNI Organised Crime Unit).

From the beginning of the paramilitary ceasefires in 1994 a small street-sector has once again emerged in the vicinity of Belfast city centre, although according to the PSNI and Belfast City Council this has not generated public nuisance complaints being situated in a largely non-residential area (Interviews with PSNI, Belfast City Council). Based on the research commissioned by the DOJ in 2014 and my own interviews with service providers there are approximately 20-30 female street-based sex workers who operate mainly in Belfast, although far smaller number are available on a day-to-day basis. The majority of street sex workers are from Northern Ireland and aged from 30-50 years (interview Belfast Commercial Sex Worker Service). There is also a small male street-based sex worker scene again based mainly in Belfast with around 10-15 male sex workers (MSWs) operating from the vicinity of a number of gay bars and clubs, but usually on weekend nights. As is the case in other jurisdictions this cohort tends to be considerably younger than their female counterparts (16-21) with some having backgrounds in institutional care (the author XXXX).

Generally the development of the Internet has seen the displacement of virtually all sexual commerce in Northern Ireland to indoor venues, principally houses, apartments and hotels. Measuring the exact size of a hidden population such as sex workers is always going to be difficult without using random or quota sampling methods (Huschke et al, 2014: Weitzer, 2011a) but even here the level of stigmatisation around prostitution means that even adopting these methodological techniques is unlikely to generate accurate answers. Consequently, researchers have to rely on other techniques that at best can only provide an indicative rather than the actual picture. An analysis of data supplied to the author from one of the largest online escort websites in the UK and Ireland suggests that out of the total number of female escorts who were registered as providing services in Northern Ireland in 2013 (around 600) only 30-50 are available to provide sexual services on any given day. The mean age of female escorts is 26.3 years. The figure for the daily availability of male escorts is even smaller ranging from 1 - 5 in Northern Ireland, and 20-30 in the Republic of Ireland. Of course, the website in question

represents only one of a range of potential escorting websites in Northern Ireland. Nevertheless, because escorts have to pay to advertise their services this provides a reasonably accurate indication of the numbers who are available in the jurisdiction on a daily basis.

An analysis of a number of other escorting websites (free and paid for) undertaken by researchers commissioned by the NI Department of Justice (Huschke et al, 2014) concluded that there are between 300-350 escorts active across Northern Ireland on any given day although many of these are not permanently resident in the jurisdiction and tour between cities on the island of Ireland. The bulk of online advertisements are for female sex workers (68%), with smaller proportions for male (27%) and trans sex workers (5%) (Huschke et al, 2014: 40). In a separate survey undertaken with 171 active sex workers in Northern Ireland, it was found that a small majority (56%) were Irish or UK nationals; 32% were EU nationals, principally from Romania and Hungary, while 12% were non-EU nationals from places such as Brazil and several African countries (Huschke et al, 2014: 44-48).

We have provided an estimate of the size of the commercial sex sector in Northern Ireland, but how much of this involves trafficking for sexual exploitation? To answer this question it is first necessary to point out that until relatively recently PSNI data on human trafficking (including that for sexual exploitation) were often unclear and difficult to come by.<sup>13</sup> In his evidence to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee in 2011, a PSNI Chief Superintendent stated that the vast majority of trafficked victims brought into Northern Ireland

...are being trafficked to feed an appetite for the sex trade... That is not just in Belfast; it is across all six counties in Northern Ireland... This is slavery, there is no other way of putting it (Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, 2011).

However, a Freedom of Information Request<sup>14</sup> (also in 2011) asking about the 'scope or level of human trafficking' in the jurisdiction drew the response from the force that 'no information is available within the PSNI as to [the] scope or level of human trafficking in Northern Ireland'. In their analysis of DOJ NI and PSNI statistics Huschke et al (2014) conclude that 'we found that the number of trafficked victims into the Northern Ireland sex industry is low and that the majority of people selling sexual services are not trafficked' (Huschke et al, 2014: 127). Somewhat curiously a report from the Organised Crime Task Force in Northern Ireland entitled *Strategic Profile of Potential Victims of Human Trafficking Recovered in Northern Ireland* (Organised Crime Task Force, 2015) only refers to *potential* victims of human trafficking but does not provide any indication of how many cases have been conclusively determined by the National Referral Mechanism (NRM) – the UK authority for human trafficking. In prosaic criminological terms of course a focus on potential victims is

meaningless insofar as logically we are all potential victims of something. However, quarterly data collated by the author from the National Crime Agency (NCA) (2012 – 2015) suggests that only around one third of these *potential* victims are conclusively determined as having been trafficked by the NRM (Table 1). In general the number of *potential* victims referred to the NRM from Northern Ireland is low, and the number of *conclusively determined* victims is lower still. Furthermore, contrary to the hysteria about trafficking for sexual exploitation the majority of referrals to the NRM from Northern Ireland were in regard to labour exploitation.

**Insert Table 1 about here.**

Similarly, there have only been two prosecutions for trafficking in Northern Ireland since 2009 - both on the grounds of sexual exploitation although neither case reflects the conventional media stereotype of the typical ‘trafficker’.

#### Eradicating sexual commerce from Northern Ireland

On the basis of the above we might legitimately question the degree to which human trafficking for sexual exploitation represents a *significant* problem in Northern Ireland. However, given the nature of the activity many anti-trafficking organisations in Northern Ireland and beyond nevertheless argue that official data merely ‘represent the tip of the iceberg’ and that there exists a huge swathe of hidden victims who exist under the radar of the authorities. Indeed, as Cree et al (2012) argue, most official and unofficial reports into trafficking encourage us to think that the ‘real’ figure of trafficking is considerably higher. However, as they ask: ‘But what if it is smaller?’ (p.10). This they suggest links to a ‘bigger question about the reliability of evidence about sex trafficking in general’ (p.10). As Weitzer (2011b) points out, without wishing to deny the very serious harms caused by trafficking, there is nevertheless a serious imbalance in our data between global estimates of trafficking, the number of ‘potential victims’ identified nationally, and the number of actual prosecutions and convictions for trafficking offences that is not supported in the research evidence. Of course, Weitzer rightly highlights the difficulties locating ‘victims in illicit, underground markets’ (Weitzer, 2011b) but he nevertheless suggests that the disparities in various sources of data ‘should at least raise doubts about the alleged scale of victimisation’. Finally, given the relatively low scale of trafficking for sexual exploitation in Northern Ireland we need to question whether the current focus of concern is actually about trafficking at all, or if it is, whether this is a peripheral concern to campaigners. I do not mean to imply an easy

functionalist logic here, nor should we necessarily impugn the intentions of those involved but there is considerable evidence that the debate about trafficking in Northern Ireland has been constructed as a front cause for another cause that has allowed an unlikely assemblage of moral entrepreneurs and advocacy coalitions (far right religious fundamentalists and left leaning feminists) to campaign for what they see as the *real* issue: The abolition of ‘prostitution’ and the eradication of commercial sex from Northern Ireland.

For Howard Becker (Becker, 1963) a moral entrepreneur can be an individual or collective entity (i.e. an organisation) that takes on a responsibility for persuading society to develop rules that reflect particular sets of moral beliefs held by the individual or the organisation in question. Indeed, for Becker the ‘prototype’ of the rule creator is the:

...crusading reformer... He is interested in the content of rules. The existing rules do not satisfy him because there is some evil which profoundly disturbs him... The crusader is fervent and righteous, often self-righteous (1963: 34).

In many respects Lord Morrow has taken on the role of moral entrepreneur and crusading reformer in the context of debates around prostitution and trafficking in Northern Ireland. Lord Morrow is fond of comparing himself to William Wilberforce (the English anti-slavery campaigner) and as he explains:

I was inspired down this road by the example of William Wilberforce and whenever I suffered a setback or received a mauling from the press or a hostile commentator, I was inspired by the words of the great man himself. Wilberforce addressing MPs all those years ago spoke the immortal words: “You may choose to look the other way, but you can never say that you did not know” (Morrow, 2014).

The problem of course, as Becker (1963) pointed out, is that moral entrepreneurs are not particularly interested in evidence and the unforeseen or downstream consequences of their actions. Indeed, while claiming to represent the interests of sex workers Lord Morrow did not feel the urge to actually speak to any. The only sex worker that Lord Morrow (by his own admission) spoke to was the Glasgow based escort, Laura Lee who he happened to meet during a television debate (Meredith, 2014). This vision of Lord Morrow as a moral entrepreneur was not lost on a sex worker that I interviewed:

I mean who gives him [Lord Morrow] the right to speak for us when he won’t even talk to us... He claims his Bill is about trafficking but it is really about sex... It is about him as a man telling me as a woman what I should do with my body. I’m an adult woman and I can make my own decisions about who I go to bed with and I don’t need Morrow peeping from behind the curtain telling me... As far as I can see there are too many people in the DUP who spend an awful lot of time thinking about sex: gay sex, straight sex all kinds of



sex... Maybe that tells you something about the DUP, I don't know... (interview with sex worker A).

Lord Morrow's sex purchase legislation reflects his core belief that the demand for trafficked victims is driven almost entirely by the sex trade. This is a position adopted by virtually all the anti-trafficking organisations in Northern Ireland (Committee for Justice, 2013) but is also reflected in official pronouncements from the PSNI and the NI Department of Justice (DOJ) who have recently sponsored an cross-border initiative called the REACH Project which is targeted at men who purchase sex and that makes an unequivocal link between prostitution and sex trafficking.<sup>15</sup> This position is somewhat odd since the research that the NI DOJ published in October 2014 emphasised that there was only a peripheral relationship between the two activities.

Traditionally prostitution was viewed by the Rev Ian Paisley (the leader of the Free Presbyterian Church and the DUP) as 'an activity which is illegal, sordid, degrading and biblically sinful [along with] with homosexual groups, paedophiles and drug dealers' (cited in Meredith, 2003). Conversely the rhetoric from the religious right now reflects what Bryan Turner terms a kind of 'moral cosmopolitanism' (Turner, 2006) and a shared vocabulary with radical feminism around human rights and gender equality (discussed below). This of course reflects the (strategic) view of some faith groups and religious campaigners that this would achieve more traction than simply appealing to religious morality and Biblical references; prostitution as 'sinful' or 'wicked', for example (Campbell and Zimmerman, 2014). Indeed, a DUP representative felt that this was a 'progressive cause' and was incredulous as to why some 'liberals' were opposed to it:

I just don't get the opposition to Lord Morrow's Bill, I really don't... I mean it is a progressive cause to root out prostitution and the sex industry from our society... I would have thought that liberal types like yourself [the author] would have been all for that... Everything about this Bill is about equality, it is about removing exploitation from our society; it is about tackling the cause of that exploitation... (interview with DUP representative).

Nevertheless, reading around the edges of Lord Morrow's legislation there is enough to suggest that as a moral entrepreneur he perceived the issue to be as much about sexual immorality as gender equality or indeed trafficking. For instance, the original draft Bill *only* made reference to prostitution and sex trafficking with trafficking for forced labour and domestic servitude added at a later stage. In addition, Lord Morrow also introduced an amendment to his Bill (Amendment 10) that goes far beyond the Nordic model to include a

specific provision where it is now also an offence in Northern Ireland for someone to receive payment for touching themselves sexually while someone watches.<sup>16</sup> This amendment, also ostensibly to ‘prevent trafficking’ pertains to those situations where ‘B touches B in a sexual manner for the sexual gratification of A, B being physically in A’s presence’. Since there is no requirement that actual sexual contact needs to have taken place between A and B this provision may conceivably apply to lap-dancing, stripping and kissogram services. This amendment was passed in the Northern Ireland Assembly by 52 votes to 32. Of course, this is another example of concerns about sexual morality exercised by some on the Christian right and resonates with the successful campaign by the Free Presbyterian Church to have Belfast’s only lap-dancing club – *The Movie Star Café* – closed in the early 2000s (McDonald, 2003). In any case, as I suggest below, the commitment to gender equality among many DUP members has a somewhat hollow ring when applied to those from LGBT communities.

### Feminism and the Christian Right

There is a clear echo between the DUP’s reading of the prostitution and trafficking issue and that espoused by some women’s groups in Northern Ireland. As noted in the introduction, developments in Northern Ireland have more of a resonance with those that have occurred in the US than elsewhere in the UK or continental Europe. A number of US scholars have pointed to the common ground of interest between a section of the radical feminist movement and the Christian right in their joint opposition to pornography in the late 1970s and early 1980s during what came to be termed the ‘sex wars’ (Zimmerman, 2012) but more recently this alignment has resurfaced in relation to both groups’ equally vociferous opposition to prostitution. It is an open question what benefit this strategic alignment brings to the radical feminist movement given the opposition of Christian and faith groups to a range of women’s issues, but in particular those around abortion and reproductive choice. Of course, this alignment has not been without its difficulties and resulted in a factious split within the US feminist movement itself (Weitzer, 2011a). Furthermore, some of the abolitionist assumptions of traditional second-wave feminist theorising have been challenged by what are termed ‘sex positive feminists’ writing from the perspectives of gender and queer studies (Rubin, 1984; McElroy, 1991; Queen & Comella, 2008). Other recent feminist accounts have refocused attention on sexual freedom, agency and victimisation in a neo-liberal context, particularly in relation to the politics of ‘protection’, and the co-optation of feminist politics and discourse within neo-liberal apparatuses of governmentality around labour and work, migration and security (Fraser 2013; Bernstein, 2010, 2012). For Bernstein (2010, 2012) this alignment between the Christian right

and the radical feminist movement in their opposition to prostitution is the result of what she sees as a rightward, conservative shift by a section of the US women's movement during the presidency of George W. Bush. Indeed, the prominent US feminist academic and activist Donna Hughes has eulogised the efforts of President Bush to tackle issues around prostitution and the global sex trade:

Mainstream [feminist] activists like to say he [President G.W. Bush] is anti-woman, but by supporting the abolitionist work against the global sex trade he has done more for women and girls than any other president I can think of... Years from now when the anti-Bush hysteria has died away, I believe he will be recognised as a true advocate for women's freedom and human rights (cited in Weitzer, 2007: 449).

In Northern Ireland the alignment of one of the largest women's organisations - Women's Aid - with the DUP around prostitution can at least be partially understood by the lack of a strong feminist tradition in the region that focuses on sexual rights and agency (Ashe, 2008; Fegan & Rebouche, 2003). Owing to expressions of nationalism during the socio-political conflict women's issues were largely subsumed within a larger conflict narrative (Cockburn, 1998). Furthermore, the residual influence of religious values and morality in Northern Ireland affected the women's movement in significant ways to the point where controversial issues around abortion and reproductive choice, not to mention female sexual rights, were often deemed too controversial to acknowledge by some feminists (Fegan & Rebouche, 2003).

Women's Aid - whose expertise lies with victims of domestic abuse not trafficking - adopts an unapologetically abolitionist stance (e.g. see Ekberg, 2004; Raymond, 2003) and argues that all commercial sex equates to rape and sexual violence (Women's Aid, 2013). As a representative of Women's Aid explained:

We fully support Lord Morrow's Bill. In our opinion prostitution is violence against women; it is a form of rape, it is abuse, it is sexual violence... While some women may say they are in prostitution through choice it is not a real choice, they are fooling themselves. I mean what woman in her right mind would ever choose to do that! (Interview with Women's Aid).

For abolitionists sexual commerce is categorically 'violence against women' (Ekberg, 2004) and should be made illegal with some even suggesting that men who pay for sex should be placed on a sex offender's register (Farley, Bindel & Golding, 2009). These arguments are essentially ideological and grounded in a particular view of patriarchal relations, but they are also indicative of a rather narrow reading of sex work and in particular the ability of women (and men) to make choices. Women exert no agency in this abolitionist perspective (Andrijasevic, 2007). They are coerced into sex work and even if they say they freely engage

in it, this is written off as ‘false consciousness’ (Ekberg, 2004). In their written and oral evidence to the NI Committee for Justice in respect of Lord Morrow’s Bill Women’s Aid refuted any possibility of female agency or choice in relation to sex work while what they term ‘prostituted women’ are universally depicted as ‘vulnerable adults’ in need of various forms of intervention (Women’s Aid, 2013). However, a sex worker that I interviewed disagreed vehemently with this analysis and raised the issue of women’s rights and sexual freedom:

Women’s Aid! Don’t make me laugh! They are just a bunch of old Victorian grannies sitting up there dictating to women about sex. They wouldn’t know what a woman’s right was if it fell out of the fucking sky. Seriously, I mean how fucking dare they. How dare they tell me that I am vulnerable, like a child who needs protection. I am a grown up woman, I’m not stupid – I’ve got a degree. But I’m also a single parent and this gives me a degree of control over my life and money for the kids. Maybe in a couple of years I’ll do something else, but for the moment I like what I do (interview with sex worker B).

From within this abolitionist perspective sex work is essentialised. Certainly, while more women undoubtedly work in the industry there are also a significant number of male sex workers who engage in sexual commerce with other men (see Minichiello & Scott, 2014; Aggleton, 1999). Indeed, the debate about Lord Morrow’s Bill in the Northern Ireland Assembly was based exclusively around the heteronormative assumption that females *sell* and males *purchase* but in spite of evidence pointing to the existence of male sellers in Northern Ireland this issue was not even mentioned or alluded to by those politicians or advocacy groups who supported the legislation. In a sense many in the DUP would no doubt find it difficult to reconcile the idea that men might sell sex to other men. But it does mean that the tenor of the debate was skewed in a way that bears little relation to the actual practice of sexual commerce on the ground. Interestingly, as the DOJ research revealed there are some male sellers who also provide services to affluent females whether for companionship or sexual excitement (Huschke et al, 2014). However, this is an aspect of the industry that relatively little is known about.

Indeed, in its written submission to the NI Justice Committee in respect of Lord Morrow’s Bill, the Belfast Feminist Network<sup>17</sup> rejected the proposals to criminalise the payment for sex arguing that this would pose particular risks to sex workers and that experiences in the sex industry were more varied than implied by Lord Morrow (Belfast Feminist Network, 2013). This position also reflects a degree of scepticism around the ‘real’ purpose of the Bill, reinforced by the party’s stance on a range of other women’s issues such as that of reproductive choice in Northern Ireland. It is perhaps no surprise that one of the strongest advocates of the legislation to criminalise the payment for sex (the DUP’s Mr Jim Wells), and

who opposes any notion of female agency in the sex industry, is also one of the strongest advocates for tightening Northern Ireland's already restrictive abortion laws further.<sup>18</sup> Mr Wells has recently proposed a series of amendment to the Justice Bill that will prohibit abortion in the jurisdiction even in the case of rape or serious foetal abnormality and introduces a prison sentence of up to ten years for a woman who procures a medical abortion in a private clinic in Northern Ireland.<sup>19</sup>

In perhaps one of the most unlikely pairings in recent political history the DUP and Lord Morrow were joined in their efforts by the Swedish radical feminist and staunch anti-prostitution activist Gunilla Ekberg, who as parliamentary advisor to the Swedish government, and co-executive Director of the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women (CATW) was instrumental in establishing sex-purchase legislation in Sweden. Ekberg acted as chief advisor to Lord Morrow and played a prominent media role at the launch of the Bill when it went out for public consultation. She also gave oral testimony on trafficking and prostitution to the Northern Ireland Justice Committee (who reviewed the Bill before it went to the Assembly for a final vote) alongside Lord Morrow and Dr Dan Boucher from CARE (Christian Action Research Education, see below). Ekberg is noted for having particularly strong stance on the issue of prostitution and has made her views clear:

In prostitution, men use women's and girls' bodies, vaginas, anuses, mouths for their sexual pleasures and as vessels of ejaculation, over and over and over again. Prostitution is not sexual liberation; it is humiliation, it is torture, it is rape, it is sexual exploitation and should be named as such. Consequently, males who use women and girls in prostitution are sexual predators and rapists (cited in Wallace 2010: 2).

Ostensibly it is difficult to see exactly what a radical feminist like Ekberg and a religious fundamentalist like Morrow have in common outside of their objection to prostitution, although even here they perceive the issue in different ways. Radical feminists such as Ekberg see prostitution as a supreme example of male dominance over females and violence against women (Ekberg, 2004). Conversely, those on the religious right, and in spite of their secular rhetoric around gender equality continue to view prostitution as a challenge to sexual integrity and the role of women in the family (Zimmerman, 2012; 2011).

#### Ontological (in)security and religious fundamentalism

In his reappraisal of Cohen's original formulation of the moral panic thesis David Garland suggests that the growth of new social media, the rise of identity politics, experts who are willing to speak in favour of 'folk devils' and a more challenging attitude to authority means

that both the nature and structure of 21<sup>st</sup> century moral panics has changed significantly from the 1960s and 1970s. For Garland (2008: 17) traditional moral panics were vertically structured and represented a fairly clear line of conflict between society and a ‘deviant’ group whereas contemporary moral panics are structured horizontally and reflect a much more ambiguous conflict or clash of interests between a *range* of social groups. Garland’s essential point is that these contemporary moral panics most closely resemble American-style ‘culture wars’ where progressive / liberal or traditional / conservative standpoints are adopted in relation to a range of issues including reproductive choice, gun control, homosexuality, faith schools, creationism to name but a few. The term was originally applied to explain the way that American politics was increasingly shaped not by social class, ethnicity or nominal religion but by competing ideological world views (Hunter, 1992). The smorgasbord quality of these new-style moral panics means that a range of interested groups can pick up on a single issue even though they ostensibly disagree, often vehemently, on a range of other issues. It is for this reason that the secular feminist left *and* the religious Christian right in the United States have been found common currency and been able to coalesce around the issue of prostitution-human trafficking.

In addition, unlike developments elsewhere in the UK or Europe the abolitionist position in Northern Ireland has incorporated a strong strand of Protestant religious fundamentalism. A number of organisations that take a strong moral entrepreneurial role in relation to conservative Christian teachings have been involved in Lord Morrow’s legislative campaign. For example, the Bill was sponsored by the London-based Christian lobbying organisation - CARE (Christian Action Research and Education) – who also played a key role in defending it during the consultation and legislative stages as it passed through the Northern Ireland Assembly. CARE holds a particular appeal to religious fundamentalists insofar as it adopts a particular stance on creationism, homosexuality, faith schools, gay marriage, stem cell research and reproductive choice.<sup>20</sup> Of course, other faith-based organisations such as Evangelical Alliance<sup>21</sup>, and the ultra-conservative Caleb Foundation<sup>22</sup> have also been involved in the debate around prostitution and trafficking.

This situation closely mirrors that which has occurred in the United States and where as Zimmerman (2012) points out in her *Other Dreams of Freedom* the Christian right came to amplify debates about sex trafficking and prostitution during the presidency of G.W. Bush. This has resulted in legislation such as the *Trafficking Victims Protection Act* which reframed sex trafficking as an issue of sexual immorality and the introduction of the *Prostitution Loyalty Oath* whereby Federal funds could only be granted to third-sector organisations (e.g. those involved in international AIDs and HIV awareness campaigns) if their outright opposition to

prostitution is declared.<sup>23</sup> As Kapur (2007: 234) notes, the issue of prostitution is a particular ‘cause for alarm’ among religious evangelicals since it questions ‘...sexual integrity and the role of women in the family. Sex for them must be non-commercial, preserved exclusively within marriage and only between a man and a woman’. Nevertheless, as Zimmerman (2012) points out ‘prostitution’ as the *sine qua non* of immoral sex was also linked to a constellation of issues that animated the religious right such as homosexuality, gay marriage, reproductive choice, creationism and pornography among others. Indeed, these issues have come to animate political debate in Northern Ireland with most members of the DUP taking a firm stance on many of them (Tonge et al, 2014). Many moral entrepreneurs in the DUP are vociferous in their opposition to homosexuality denouncing it as ‘vile’ (Iris Robinson cited in Belfast Telegraph, 2008) and ‘repulsive’ (Ian Paisley Jnr cited in Belfast Telegraph, 2007) while the former DUP Health Minister Edwin Poots was engaged in a protracted legal battle to prevent same sex couples from adopting children and gay people from donating blood (Belfast Telegraph, 2013). Lord Morrow himself campaigned against lowering the age of homosexual consent and is a noted opponent of *the Equality Act (sexual orientation) Regulations Northern Ireland [2007]* that makes it an offence to discriminate against members of the LGBT community. More recently, the DUP Health Minister Mr Jim Wells was forced to resign when he claimed that children raised in same-sex households were more likely to be abused (Belfast Telegraph, 2015).

Northern Ireland shares a similar cultural topography with the southern US bible-belt states due to reasons of past Ulster-Scots immigration (Jones, 1980) and politically and culturally it is based on a strong strand of Protestant religious fundamentalism and that is represented by the Free Presbyterian Church (which is closely allied to the DUP) and any number of smaller Protestant sects and groupings (Baptists, Elim Pentecostals, Brethren etc.). This of course is not to suggest that *all* members of the Protestant / unionist community subscribe to fundamentalist religious principles and in fact many loyalists in working-class Protestant areas across Northern Ireland have low levels of religiosity and high levels of secularisation (see Shirlow, 2012). Nor is it to suggest that other churches such as the Roman Catholic church or mainstream Protestant churches are necessarily silent on the issue of prostitution or trafficking. Indeed, the Catholic church would no doubt share many of the same concerns about what it sees as ‘prostitution’ with the DUP. But nevertheless the issue that distinguishes the Free Presbyterian Church from mainstream religious groupings is that the church has so many members representing key positions in government and who are in a strong position to bring their moral-religious principles into the legislative and policy arena.

While membership of the church is only representative of around 1.0% of Northern Irish Protestants, it is nevertheless disproportionately over-represented in the Northern Ireland Assembly with 37% of DUP MLAs being members of the Church (Tonge et al: 2014: 7). Within the Assembly many church members hold senior positions in the Party with some also holding ministerial positions in government and as Tonge et al note ‘it is remarkable that so many members of a single, tiny church can populate a political party’ (2014: 137). For many on the religious wing of the Party it is strict adherence to the Bible that provides their programme for action. As the DUP MLA Mr Paul Girvan explains:

Some people might say that religion and politics should never really mix. I am a total disbeliever in that aspect because I believe politics came about through religion. If you use the Ten Commandments you can formulate almost every law you need... (cited in Tonge et al, 2014: 144).

As Garland points out (Garland, 2008) moral panics are often indicative of cultural conflicts and while the cartography of panics is obviously different now to that which existed in the 1960s and 1970s they are no less *cultural*. The panic over sex trafficking and prostitution displays a *symptomatic* quality where ‘...the reaction’s of society’s guardians always reach beyond the immediate problem, linking it to other disturbing symptoms of malaise. It is not just this they say before presenting claims about associated problems and wider malaise’ (Garland, 2008: 11). Developing this symptomatic quality it is possible to argue following Laing (1973); see also Giddens 1990)) that the prostitution / trafficking debate in Northern Ireland points to a broader sense of ontological insecurity among a section of the Protestant / unionist community and an ‘anxious concern on the part of certain social actors that an established value system is being threatened’ (Garland, 2008: 11). Some of these anxieties are in the political realm and many unionists particularly those in the DUP felt that the peace process delivered on the back of the Belfast Agreement (1998) was ‘morally repugnant’ (Tonge et al, 2014: 140). However, for those on the religious right (such as those in the Free Presbyterian Church) it is in the social realm where these anxieties come to the fore and prostitution is just one example of wider concerns about uncontrolled sexuality, female purity and family integrity (Meredith, 2015). As the DUP’s Mr Jim Wells suggests ‘...prostitution and trafficking for prostitution is taking the innocence of a woman and selling her to multiple males for money...’ (cited in *They Work for You*, 2013). For those on the Christian right they are merely responding to what they see as a slippery slope: Religious groups lost the battle over Sunday trading, Sunday licensing and Sunday football in Northern Ireland but it is the British government’s social-liberalising agenda that represents a kind of doomsday scenario.



Lowering the age of consent for homosexual relationships, the introduction of civil partnerships, LGBT equality legislation, and the debate about gay marriage and reproductive choice are all a collective nightmare for a section of Northern Irish society that absolutely and totally sees its traditional value system as being under attack. It is in this way that some MLAs view the DUP as a bulwark against liberalising tendencies in a Northern Ireland that 'is becoming less and less evangelical, less Christian' (DUP MLA Mr Jim Wells, cited in Tonge et al, 2014: 144). As such, the issue of prostitution and trafficking can be seen as a prism through which other social anxieties and concerns are refracted.

### Conclusion

This paper has assessed debates about trafficking and prostitution in Northern Ireland through the framework of Cohen's (1972) moral panic thesis. I have suggested that trafficking in its formally understood (Palermo Protocol) sense is not a significant issue in Northern Ireland, while the commercial sex sector which is mainly located in Belfast is smaller than other comparable UK cities. As such, elements of Cohen's thesis resonate clearly with developments in Northern Ireland: we have had the emergence of a 'problem' – sex trafficking that is conflated with prostitution - that has been hyped by the media and cracked down on hard by the authorities, plus we have had the emergence of advocacy groups who insist – in spite of evidence to the contrary – that the problem is bigger than anyone could ever imagine. Nevertheless, Cohen's original formulation needs recast slightly to take account of the contemporary horizontal nature of moral panics that seem to bear more of a relationship to US-style culture wars. I have suggested in the paper that this has provided the ideal opportunity for secular feminists and moral entrepreneurs on the religious right to come together to campaign on the same issue, but which nevertheless masks considerable differences in how the issue is understood. Furthermore, I have suggested that such panics display a symptomatic quality (c.f. Garland, 2008) and that for some religious fundamentalists in Northern Ireland the debate about prostitution is really a debate about moral turpitude, uncontrolled sexuality and idealised femininity that in turn link to a broader sense of anxiety around the nature of social change and societal liberalism. As was the case in the United States the 'coming together' of a segment of secular feminism and the religious right was hugely controversial resulting in a split in the feminist movement (Bernstein, 2012) and it remains to be seen what the outpourings of this will be in Northern Ireland.

Certainly while the Scottish and Westminster Parliaments have previously rejected similar proposals to criminalise the purchase of sex, it is likely that developments in Northern Ireland

(and similar legislation proposed in the Irish Republic) will lead to renewed calls for sex-purchase legislation in Scotland and England, and some campaign groups have suggested that Northern Ireland is blazing a trail that the rest of the UK should follow (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Prostitution, 2014). Consequently, developments in Northern Ireland may be seen as a test-bed for the implementation of sex-purchase legislation across the UK as a whole.

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<sup>1</sup> Amended to 'sexual services of a person' in the final version of the Bill.

<sup>2</sup> The 'Nordic model' is a policy framework, associated primarily with Scandinavian jurisdictions, which sees prostitution as 'violence against women'. Ostensibly the framework criminalises purchasers or clients rather than sex workers. Research, however, has suggested that in practice it is often workers who are targeted by the authorities rather than clients, that the model has simply displaced much sexual commerce to indoor establishments where it remains hidden from view and that it has exacerbated levels of risk and danger to sex workers (see Levy, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> I am using the term 'Christian right' here to refer to those Protestant faith groups who adopt an orthodox, fundamentalist, or conservative stance to their religious practice. Such groups often maintain a literal stance to the Bible and take a particularly conservative line on a range of social issues. Such groups are more common in the US (and I suggest Northern Ireland) than in other jurisdictions.

<sup>4</sup> I am not suggesting that religious influences are not relevant in Europe only that they are significantly *less* relevant than in the US and Northern Ireland. Both the US (under the administration of President G.W. Bush) and Northern Ireland saw significant numbers of the Christian right occupying key positions in government and who have been able to influence the tenor of these debates.

<sup>5</sup> Name of funding body and grant reference will be inserted in final paper.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.bbc.co.uk/northernireland/>

<sup>7</sup> See NI Committee for Justice Written Submissions, *Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Further Provisions and Support for Victims Bill)* <http://www.niassembly.gov.uk/assembly-business/committees/justice/legislation---committee-stage-of-bills/the-human-trafficking-and-exploitation-further-provisions-and-support-for-victims-bill---committee-stage/written-submissions/> (Accessed 11<sup>th</sup> August, 2015).

<sup>8</sup> This is Northern Ireland's largest political party and was established by the Rev Ian Paisley. It attracts votes from the Protestant / unionist community and is very conservative adopting a strong religious stance on a range of issues such as homosexuality, abortion, creationism, faith schools, and gay marriage. It is closely affiliated to the Free Presbyterian Church that I describe below.

<sup>9</sup> See comments made by the DUP MLA Mr Jim Wells in relation to Romanian and Vietnamese immigrants to Northern Ireland (Committee for Justice, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> See <http://www.stophetraffik.org/who-we-are>, Accessed 1<sup>st</sup> May, 2015

<sup>11</sup> See <http://nomoretraffik.com/trafficking101>. This page has now been removed from *No More Traffik's* web server. However, a cached copy of the original page is available at [www.web.archive.net](http://www.web.archive.net). I have a copy of the original webpage on file dated 6<sup>th</sup> December 2013.

<sup>12</sup> See *Sexual Offences (Northern Ireland) Order 2008*.

<sup>13</sup> For instance reference is often made to "potential victims" while figures for different kinds of trafficking are sometimes presented in the aggregate.

<sup>14</sup> PSNI, Freedom of Information Request, F 2011 01520. Available:

[http://www.psni.police.uk/human\\_trafficking\\_2.pdf](http://www.psni.police.uk/human_trafficking_2.pdf)

<sup>15</sup> See REACH Project. <http://wedontbuyit.eu/>

<sup>16</sup> See Human Trafficking and Exploitation (Criminal Justice and Support for Victims) Bill Annotated Marshalled List of Amendments Further Consideration Stage Monday 1 December 2014, Amendment 10. Northern Ireland Assembly.



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<sup>17</sup> The Belfast Feminist Network is a recently established network of over 1,000 feminist activists that seeks to engage with broader questions of sexuality, female agency, masculinity and the relationship between religion and gendered attitudes in Northern Ireland.

<sup>18</sup> The Abortion Act [1967] does not apply in Northern Ireland.

<sup>19</sup> Northern Ireland Assembly (2014): Details of the call for evidence on the Justice Bill and proposed amendments. Belfast: Northern Ireland Assembly.

<sup>20</sup> See CARE 'Making a Christian Difference'. Website: <http://www.care.org.uk/>

<sup>21</sup> See: <http://www.eauk.org/northern-ireland/>

<sup>22</sup> The Caleb Foundation is a Northern Irish based political pressure group that numbers many DUP and Free Presbyterian supporters among its ranks. It imagines a Northern Ireland run according to strict Biblical lines. See: <http://www.calebfoundation.org/>.

<sup>23</sup> In June 2013 the US Supreme Court struck down the Prostitution Loyalty Oath as unconstitutional. This however, only relates to organisations that operate within the US. Organisations such as the Poppy Project that operate in the UK but which obtain Federal US government funding are not affected by the ruling.