

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Working in Sex Worker Safety. Living in Fear.

Ugly Mugs (UM) Ireland calls on the Irish government to enable sex workers and their supporters the opportunity to participate in political and public life, as is their human right. The exclusion that has persisted to date must now come to an end.

Further, in jurisdictions like Ireland, where sex workers and their supporters routinely encounter serious abuse, Ugly Mugs insists that the option of virtual participation in meetings via video conferencing instead of in-person participation must be available to at-risk persons.

Equal participation in political and public life is an internationally recognised human right. But, in Ireland, sex workers and their supporters are frequently deliberately excluded from involvement in important government work programmes directly related to sex work. This is predominantly because all the 'seats at the tables' are taken up by powerful well-funded NGOs who actively work to exclude sex workers, and practitioners and experts who disagree with them. These damaging policies of exclusion must now be replaced by fair policies of inclusion. Nothing about us without us.

The Irish Government must also acknowledge the serious abuse that sex workers and sex worker rights defenders face in Ireland. The extent of the risk to safety for some persons means they cannot safely travel to/from and attend in-person meetings and events.

Therefore, the Government must make available the option of participation in meetings and events via video conferencing, for those who require this for their safety.

The horrific levels of violence inflicted on people in sex work in Ireland is well evidenced. Lucy Smyth who operates Ugly Mugs Ireland, a website and mobile app that aims to improve safety for sex workers, asserts that sex worker rights defenders like her are also at risk, and details some of her individual experiences to show why change is needed.

Ugly Mugs previously openly attended many in-person sex worker rights protests and events in Ireland. Lucy gave a considerable number of presentations at academic

conferences, evidence to government committees and regularly met a wide range of people – from politicians and civil servants to police and healthcare workers – to advocate for sex worker safety. However, due to ongoing attacks, in recent years UM has attended very few in-person events and meetings.

We are pleased to announce that as of March 2022 Ugly Mugs Ireland is adopting a Virtual Engagement Policy. This means UM personnel will only participate in online events and meetings. The organisation will not attend in-person events or meetings. We hope this policy will increase not decrease UM participation.

This policy has been adopted on safety grounds and will greatly reduce the risk of in-person abuse to UM personnel. Much like the woman who walks alone or goes out at night or wears a short skirt shouldn't have to change her behaviour to avoid being attacked, this policy shouldn't be necessary. But the reality is that criminalisation and stigmatisation of sex work have been official policy in Ireland for many years and this has made life too dangerous for those in sex work. Those of us experiencing abuse must be able to take what we feel are necessary safety precautions.

In 2019 Ugly Mugs was contacted by Dublin-based human rights organisation, Front Line Defenders (FLD), who were at that time carrying out research which led to the 2021 report, *Sex Worker Rights Defenders At Risk*. Lucy declined to speak to FLD at that time, as she feared speaking out about her situation would only put her at further risk. However, Lucy now wishes to place on the record that she has long experienced serious abuses as a direct result of UM's work. As the FLD report outlines, governments need to act to put in place protections and supports for at risk human rights defenders.

Lucy says the responsibility of physically standing up to the aggressors here is not the responsibility of the victims of that aggression. Whilst Ugly Mugs is able to take this action to protect itself, we note that most people in sex work don't have the privilege to take many security measures. It is illegal for them to even work with a friend for safety. These grotesque laws and all the state harms to people in sex work must be challenged.

Lucy Smyth says that operating Ugly Mugs has meant that she has become a target for hate. The abuse comes from a range of sources. It can be anti-sex work radical feminists or religious fundamentalists or people somehow involved in the sex industry. It can be police,

politicians, professionals. Very many of the abusers, especially those who make constant rape and death threats are people who were effectively hiding behind the anonymity of the Internet etc, or at least it isn't usually entirely clear who they are.

To give some examples of the abuse, threats and violence that sex worker human rights defenders can experience in Ireland, Lucy Smyth of Ugly Mugs recalls some incidents which have had a damaging effect on her.

- Being physically attacked on numerous occasions by a wide range of people.
- Being stalked and threatened for years by a young man in his early twenties, who had mental health issues and became obsessed with the hateful dishonest rhetoric of the Turn Off the Red Light (TORL) anti sex work campaign, and subsequently fixated on and terrorised Lucy (and indeed many sex workers and other persons). This only ended when the young man ended his own life by shooting himself.
- Attending an academic conference in Limerick to speak about sex worker safety jointly with her friend, the sex worker human rights defender Laura Lee. After the conference, Lucy and Laura talked further about sex worker safety to a journalist at the conference hotel. Lucy then went to bed. The following morning, Lucy discovered that after she had gone to bed, Laura had been seriously physically and sexually assaulted. This had a devastating impact on Laura who has sadly since died and is greatly missed every single day. Let's please be clear about what happened here: a man came to an event on sex worker safety to viciously attack a sex worker. This is our reality. And it is not ok.
- Years of relentless bullying from members of An Garda Síochána is what Lucy says has had the most profoundly devastating impact on her life. The many 'meetings' that were held with An Garda Síochána to discuss sex worker safety are what Lucy describes as the worst experiences of her life. They often ended in Lucy having psychological breakdowns, and sometimes having to be hospitalised, for what is now generally medically termed Acute Stress Reaction (ASR). No person advocating for the safety of sex workers should ever be treated like this by An Garda Síochána.
- Conversely the PSNI (Police Service of Northern Ireland) were sympathetic and supportive towards Lucy in regard to the abuse she was experiencing. They offered Lucy police protection on numerous occasions. But police protection when she was

compelled to accept it wasn't nice either she says: *"Being surrounded by armed police for your own protection doesn't feel safe. It feels uncomfortable and scary."*

Sex workers and sex worker rights defenders are strong people. We continue to campaign for human rights for sex workers. We openly speak to power what are often private and painful truths we don't want to have to disclose in public, but we do so in the hope that speaking up can bring change and others will not have to suffer as we have.

Ugly Mugs is asking people in power– in particular the Minister for Justice and the Garda Commissioner - to understand the very real physical dangers faced by some marginalised communities, like sex workers and sex worker human rights defenders, and to facilitate the participation in official meetings and events of such persons (by video conferencing if requested) in order to address important human rights issues.

If you are a person / organisation who is being excluded from participation in important government meetings and events that impact on your life and you need the option of participation by video conferencing for various reasons, we stand in solidarity with you.

ENDS

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Ugly Mugs is a volunteer-run not-for-profit technology initiative that runs a safety scheme for sex workers in Ireland. Please see <https://uglymugs.ie/> for further details

Useful Documents:

Amnesty International (2022) Ireland: "We live within a violent system." Structural violence against sex workers in Ireland.

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/eur29/5156/2022/en/>

Campbell, R., Smith, L., Leacy, B., Ryan, M. and Stoica, B. (2020) Not Collateral Damage: Trends in Violence and Hate Crimes Experienced by Sex Workers in the Republic of Ireland. Irish Journal of Sociology.

<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0791603520939794>

Front Line Defenders (2021) Sex Worker Rights Defenders At Risk.

https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/flid_swrdr_final_english.pdf