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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the special session of the General Assembly entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives

Statement submitted by Armenian International Women’s Association, Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd, Dominican Leadership Conference, Edmund Rice International, International Council of Jewish Women, Loretto Community, Mouvement mondial des mères international, Regards de femmes, Scalabrini International Migration Network, Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Society of Catholic Medical Missionaries and World Federation of Ukrainian Women’s Organizations, non-governmental organizations in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.



Statement

We, non-governmental organizations working towards gender equality, affirm the need for comprehensive strategies to eliminate and prevent all forms of violence against women and girls. The Beijing Declaration, adopted by the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, states that violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace.

Violence against women undermines women's ability to enjoy equality and human rights. Sexual violence and exploitation are among the most devastating forms of violence, and have proliferated owing to increased globalization, technology and the economic downturn of the global economy.

One of the most severe, devastating and escalating practices of gender-based violence is the commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls, including prostitution, sex trafficking, the Internet bride industry, pornography and sex tourism. Through the sex industry, male violence against women is normalized. The use of women and girls in prostitution and pornography is a cultural practice that occurs globally, perpetuating violence and promoting negative stereotypes. With the normalization of objectification, societies are experiencing increased rates of sexual harassment and sexual violence along with increased demand for prostitution and pornography.

If the demand for commercial sex is ignored or normalized, men's abusive practices against women and girls will be reinforced. The pervasive nature of such beliefs is inimical to the advancement of women. Demand must be addressed. As studies of male buyers have revealed, men's sexual access to women and girls in the sex industry has significant detrimental effects on all women and girls, making sexual violence more acceptable and reinforcing gender inequality. Studies show that men who buy commercial sex are more likely to be involved in other criminal acts, such as domestic violence.

Sex trafficking is a customary practice that accepts female objectification and exploitation and thrives on male demand. It is based on stereotypical gender roles that subordinate women and girls, reducing them to consumable sexual objects, while giving male buyers control over their purchases. Commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls is gender stereotyping in its most extreme form: men view women and girls as products to be bought and sold. The belief that women's role is to be sexually accessible and submissive to men is reinforced, while dominance and power are attributed to men.

Recharacterizing the exploitation of prostitution as "sex work" furthers this gendered stereotype of women's inferiority. Framing sexual services as a societal necessity and a normal job for women perpetuates men's sexual and social dominance. It encourages the myth that women's bodies exist for men's sexual use, and that without giving men the sexual "outlet" of using women in prostitution, men would perpetrate purportedly more dangerous acts, such as sexually harassing female co-workers, abusing wives, or raping "proper" women or girls. Sacrificing some women and girls to preserve the safety of more fortunate women is dangerously misguided and inconsistent with gender equality, which cannot be attained when communities support the abuse of a subclass of women and girls. Normalization of prostitution and pornography maintains the stereotype that men are entitled to unfettered sexual access to women. Moreover, the acceptability of buying women

for sex increases men's willingness to engage in sexual harassment, rape and sexually aggressive behaviour.

Experts have placed increasing emphasis on addressing the demand for prostitution. The Special Rapporteur on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography, Juan Miguel Petit, and the Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children, Sigma Huda, both focused on demand in their 2006 annual reports. Petit noted that progress would be hard to achieve in the fight against commercial sexual exploitation of children if more attention was not paid to diminishing the demand among the (mostly) male customers who abused them. Moreover, in reference to the Palermo Protocol, Ms. Huda indicated that States parties had an obligation to discourage the use of prostituted persons generally.

Some countries have attempted to address demand for commercial sex by encouraging men to buy women in prostitution in a so-called "responsible" manner, trusting the men who buy women and girls to identify the victims and only patronize those they believe are not trafficking victims. This approach is not an appropriate response to the problem of sexual violence against women and girls who are sold for commercial sex. There is no manner in which buying a human being is acceptable. Women's and girls' bodies should not be treated as commodities. See the statement by, *inter alia*, the Forum for Women and Development, the Coalition against Trafficking in Women and the European Women's Lobby to the sixth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, held in Vienna in October 2012.

The best approach to combating the violence against women and girls that occurs in forms of commercial sexual exploitation is to criminalize the purchase of commercial sex. As noted in the report of the Expert Group Meeting on prevention of violence against women and girls, women in the sex industry experience high rates of violence, including from law enforcement actors, clients, other stakeholders involved in the sex trade and intimate partners, along with frequent discrimination. According to the report, violence against prostituted women is often not taken seriously by the police and justice systems, and legal policies fail to effectively outlaw and punish such violence. The report cites studies of countries that criminalize buyers of commercial sex but do not criminalize women and girls in prostitution, instead providing them with comprehensive services and appropriate justice system responses when they are victims of violence and exploitation. These studies have found that under these systems that hold buyers accountable and recognize prostituted women and girls as victims, those experiencing violence have better access to justice, redress and services; that there have been attitudinal shifts against the purchase of sex (particularly among young people); and, importantly, that it has significantly reduced sex trafficking and the involvement of organized crime in the sex industry. Therefore, government policies decriminalizing the women and girls whose bodies are bought and sold, while simultaneously holding criminally accountable those who purchase sex, have worked best to address violence against women and girls in prostitution and shape norms that reject violence against women and girls in their societies. This model represents a best practice for combating the violence of commercial sexual exploitation.

Recommendations

States must honour their commitment to eradicate violence against women, particularly sexual violence and exploitation, through policy and action in the following areas:

- Increasing awareness of women's rights, human rights and the grievous harms of all forms of violence against women, including domestic violence, rape, female genital mutilation, trafficking and sexual abuse and exploitation, including the use and making of pornography, through community-based training and training for government officials, the judiciary, law enforcement and policymakers
- Affecting social norms through advocacy and education in the community; supporting and funding training using factual evidence showing the harm caused by gender-based violence, including immediate and long-term pain and health problems
- Providing support for economic and educational opportunities for women and girls
- Elimination of structural factors that push women and girls into prostitution, pornography and trafficking, such as poverty, systematic violence against women and girls, gender discrimination and other forms of discrimination
- Developing and promoting effective laws holding perpetrators of domestic violence, female genital mutilation, child marriages, rape and trafficking, prostitution, sex tourism and related forms of sexual exploitation accountable, including provisions criminalizing the demand for prostitution
- Enforcing effective prosecution of the sellers and buyers of commercial sex via the Internet and other media
- Providing adequate funding and support services for survivors of gender-based violence, including financial assistance, education and job training, employment opportunities, housing, medical and mental health services, legal advocacy, immigration assistance and language training
- Supporting educational programmes addressing the prevention of sexual violence in the context of gender equality, including empowerment for women and girls, and the harm caused by sexual violence and sexual stereotypes for men and boys
- Rejecting legalization or normalization of the commercial sex industry; recognizing that such policies are not an appropriate or effective approach to combating the spread of HIV/AIDS
- Ratification and implementation of the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women; the Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography; and the Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children
- Establishing and implementing monitoring mechanisms for international conventions that address trafficking, with specific attention to the demand for commercial sex