



## **Economic and Social Council**

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### **Commission on the Status of Women**

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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”**

### **Statement submitted by Coalition against Trafficking in Women, a non-governmental organization 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

Coalition against Trafficking in Women, a non-governmental organization committed to promoting the human rights of women and girls and taking action to eliminate violence against women, particularly trafficking and prostitution, reaffirms the message in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, that violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace. While some progress in the struggle to eliminate male sexual violence against women has occurred in the 20 years since the adoption of the Declaration and Platform for Action through legal and policy changes in many countries, efforts to eliminate violence and discrimination against women and girls must accelerate. Gender equality remains an elusive goal that requires significant investment from Member States. We cannot deny or ignore the human rights abuses women suffer, nor can we place blame on the women who suffer such abuses.

This is too often the case for women who are bought and sold in the commercial sex trade. A tendency to focus on the achievements of elite women and to view the commercial sex industry as reflective of so-called economic agency and sexual expression of women has blinded some Governments, United Nations agencies and certain segments of civil society to the harms of commercial sexual exploitation and its inherent gender-based violence and discrimination. Myths that the proliferation of the commercial sex industry is not inimical to women's human rights mask the continuing structural inequality of socioeconomic conditions and preserve patriarchal entitlement to sexual access to the bodies of women and girls.

Equal opportunities for women and men, and girls and boys, a hope expressed in Beijing, have led to some positive changes in laws and practices in many parts of the world. However, the illusion that women and girls now have equal options and, therefore, that commercial sexual exploitation is a matter of choice has led to policies that reinforce rather than eliminate inequality. Prostitution, like other forms of sexual violence, arises from the historical subordination of women to men and is an absence of choice. The sex trade is built upon and maintains women's low social status in society and relegates women to the role of sexual merchandise. The exchange of money for the use of the bodies of women does not obliterate the sexual harassment, sexual violence, physical and psychological harm and dehumanization that women face daily in the commercial sex industry at the hands of traffickers, pimps and buyers of sex. Rather than promoting women's empowerment, commercial sexual exploitation embodies and perpetuates gender inequality.

To promote the empowerment of women and girls, Governments must eliminate all forms of violence and discrimination, including commercial sexual exploitation. In the Platform for Action (paragraph 130(b)), Governments and regional and international organizations are urged to take appropriate measures to address the root factors, including external factors, that encourage trafficking in women and girls for prostitution and other forms of commercialized sex. A key root cause is the demand for prostitution that persists and flourishes as a result of governmental and societal acceptance of this harmful cultural practice. The demand must be addressed with comprehensive legislation that criminalizes buying commercial sex and profiting from the prostitution of others, by prosecuting buyers as well as traffickers, educating young people about the harms of prostitution and addressing the media's sexualization of women and girls and its normalization of



prostitution. Another root factor is the vulnerability of women and girls who are marginalized due to poverty, racism or with a history of suffering from sexual violence. Providing assistance to such vulnerable women, including housing, medical, educational, financial and mental health services, is essential to establishing a safety net for potential victims.

There has been limited success in discouraging trafficking in women and girls despite the requirement set out in the Platform for Action that Governments take measures to address the root causes of trafficking (paragraph 130), and the subsequent mandate under article 9, paragraph 5, of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which requires States parties to adopt measures to discourage the demand that fosters all forms of exploitation of persons, especially women and children, that leads to trafficking. In fact, some countries have adopted policies that normalize commercial sexual exploitation through the legalization of the sex industry, thereby increasing male demand for women and girls in prostitution, which fuels the global market for sex trafficking. As long as men and boys view women and girls as commodities to be bought and sold, the idea will be ingrained in them that every woman has her price, and all women will be seen and treated as inherently unequal. Additionally, young men and boys must receive education to counteract social pressures to engage in commercial sexual exploitation and to learn about establishing gender equality in their relationships with women and girls in their families and communities.

Given our increasing reliance on technology and online communications, the media remain a powerful vehicle for promoting sexualized violence against women. According to the Platform for Action, effective measures are to be taken, including appropriate legislation against pornography and the projection of violence against women and children in the media (paragraph 243(f)). The sexualization and commodification of women and girls in the media directly undermines the promotion of women's equality and human rights. Far from showing the "liberation" of women, sexualized images are a form of backlash against progress towards equality. They promote the dangerous message that women are exercising their freedom of choice by engaging in sexualized and stereotyped roles, and hide the inequalities and vulnerabilities that put women and girls at risk for sexual violence and exploitation.

Governments, the media and civil society must exercise great caution when describing women and girls exploited in the sex trade. In the Platform for Action, the media are encouraged to refrain from presenting women as inferior beings and exploiting them as sexual objects and commodities (paragraph 243(d)). Terms such as "sex work" and "sex worker" normalize and mask the pervasive violence and human rights abuses that define the commercial sex trade. Furthermore, these terms are not found in international law nor in the Platform for Action and therefore have no place within the documents of the United Nations and its agencies.

Urgent action is needed to address the pervasiveness of and easy access to pornography, especially on the Internet. Since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, a generation of boys and girls has become desensitized to the sexualized violence in pornography and other media. Thus the sexualized abuse and violence that is normalized in pornography is not only harmful



to the women in it, but to all members of society, who become insensitive to degrading images and indoctrinated in their message about stereotypical sexual roles.

We call on all States to honour their commitments in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action by eradicating male violence against women and girls, including commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking. We urgently appeal for the following actions:

- (a) Implementing international and regional conventions that seek to eliminate violence against women, including the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Optional Protocol thereto; the Convention on the Rights of the Child; the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others; and the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime and the Protocol thereto;
- (b) Training of and accountability for institutional players at all levels, including police, judges, prosecutors and other community leaders in recognizing exploited women and girls as crime victims, not as immoral or criminal;
- (c) Strengthening laws and policies to assist victims of gender-based violence, including rape and sexual abuse;
- (d) Criminalizing perpetrators of all crimes of sexual exploitation, including buyers and procurers of prostituted and trafficked women and girls;
- (e) Creating economic programmes for women at risk of being trafficked and sexually exploited, and raising awareness about the dangers of trafficking;
- (f) Adopting immigration remedies for victims of sexual violence and exploitation, including asylum and lawful residency;
- (g) Supporting educational programmes addressing the prevention of sexual violence in the broader context of gender equality, including education and empowerment for women and girls, and education on the harms of sexual violence and sexual stereotypes for men and boys;
- (h) Increasing medical assistance for victims of sexual exploitation and other violence, including appropriate mental health services addressing their extensive trauma, depression, anxiety and drug dependency;
- (i) Rejecting the legalization or normalization of sexual violence or the lack of prosecution or enforcement of laws that attempt to hold perpetrators accountable;
- (j) Recognizing the role of the media and the Internet in promoting sexual violence, and adopting measures to combat the growing sexualization of women and girls and abuse of women and girls in the production and consumption of pornography.