



## Economic and Social Council

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### Commission on the Status of Women

Sixty-seventh session

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**Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and  
to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly  
entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and  
peace for the twenty-first century”**

### **Statement submitted by Global Alliance Against Traffic 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.

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\* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



## Statement

The Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women is an alliance of non-governmental organisations from Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas. We see the phenomenon of human trafficking intrinsically embedded in the context of migration for the purpose of labour. We therefore promote and defend the rights of all migrant women against the threat of an increasingly globalised labour market. We work to ensure respect for the rights of all migrant women and the rights of women in the formal and informal work sectors, including garment and food processing, agriculture and farming, domestic work, and sex work.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our Alliance was forced to resort to online technologies to an unprecedented extent. We saw that online technologies presented a huge opportunity for women to organise to improve their working conditions. However, we also saw huge inequality amongst women's access to technology. There are several drivers of this unequal access: women of low socioeconomic status cannot afford electronic devices; governments fail to provide rural areas with the necessary infrastructure for consistent internet access; anti-democratic laws and policies restrict internet access and access to online communication platforms; discrimination in education results in lower levels of digital literacy for some women and girls.

Over the years, we have also become increasingly concerned by the overemphasis on technology as the “solution” to trafficking and labour exploitation, in a way that distracts from the social context and underlying socioeconomic causes of these phenomena. At the same time, we have become increasingly concerned by the (mis)use of technology to control and curtail women workers' and migrants' rights and freedoms, particularly women who are selling sexual services and those working in the gig economy.

We have recommendations in three key areas which we urge Member States to consider during the sixty-seventh session of the Commission on the Status of Women:

### **i. Online digital technology must be available and accessible for all women workers**

Globally, trade unions continue to be dominated by men, and restrictions on women's freedom of movement and socialisation have historically acted as a barrier to their efforts to meet with other workers and organise. During the pandemic, the ability of women workers to organise and campaign for change became further restricted, with many women migrants and workers in the informal sectors being confined to their homes and/or places of work. In some informal sectors, the home and the place of work is one and the same, further reducing the opportunity for women to meet with other workers away from their employers.

Over time, access to digital technology has presented many women workers with the opportunity to overcome these barriers. During the pandemic, migrant women workers forced to stay indoors turned to social media platforms to tell their stories to fellow workers, and in doing so were able to reach a far wider audience than ever before. As workers turned to technology for innovative ways to stay in touch and communicate during the pandemic, women were able to introduce more secure ways of reporting workplace abuse through chat apps and other online reporting systems. For domestic workers forced to stay at their place of work with no time off, what began as regular online meetings to check in on each other's wellbeing, turned into opportunities to collectivise and organise.

Access to digital technologies over the years has also enabled women to improve their conditions of work. The sex industry has been at the forefront of technological change and online technologies have afforded workers more flexibility and choice in

the way they work. During the pandemic more than ever online technologies enhanced the safety of working conditions in the sex industry by providing opportunities for workers to meet clients virtually from their own home.

Technological advances in recent years, and not just during the pandemic, have also given low-wage women workers greater opportunity to communicate directly with businesses at the top of the supply chain, who are increasingly using technology to communicate with hard-to-reach workers in the supply chain so that these workers can provide feedback on their working conditions directly.

**ii. Technological advances alone cannot address the underlying causes of trafficking and labour exploitation**

Whilst these examples demonstrate the positive opportunities for the advancement of women presented by technology, technological advances alone cannot combat trafficking and labour exploitation and investment in technological tools to combat trafficking must not come at the expense of efforts to address the underlying causes of these phenomena.

Despite huge investment in such technologies by Member States, corporations, funders, and civil society, there is limited evidence that currently available anti-trafficking technological “solutions” have any benefit for migrant and trafficked women and women low-wage workers.

Many technological innovations in this sector wrongly suggest that trafficking is a problem of individual victims and perpetrators that should be fought on a micro level. Technological responses tend to frame trafficking as a deviance that can be addressed through stronger surveillance or individual reporting mechanisms. All too often technology proposes “simple solutions,” focused on identifying and “rescuing” victims. In doing so, they ignore the social context in which trafficking and exploitative practices occur.

In the gig economy we have witnessed a similar obscuring effect, where rather than addressing the underlying causes of labour exploitation, technological advances have merely given women workers the false impression of more control over their working conditions. On-demand online platforms have made it easier for some low-wage workers to find employment, but have done nothing to tackle the undervaluation of low-wage work. For example, the domestic work sector has seen a rise in on-demand platforms, yet there has often been no resulting improvement in working conditions or respect for workers’ rights.

**iii. Technology must not be used to curtail the rights and freedoms of women workers**

We are deeply concerned by the increasing use of technology by businesses and Member States to curtail the rights and freedoms of women workers.

This has been particularly true for women selling sexual services, where the fight against human trafficking has been used to restrict or close websites that advertise commercial sexual services. As technological advancement has furthered sex workers’ inclusion and their control over their working conditions, state surveillance of online platforms in the name of anti-trafficking has simultaneously increased, and more and more online platforms have been shut down, leading to a reduction in income, and the opportunity to screen clients and engage with supporting communities.

Technology has also enabled state surveillance to extend beyond national borders and has therefore accelerated transnational efforts by countries to interfere with the rights and freedoms of women who sell sexual services. A law that prohibits

users of online platforms from selling sexual services in one country can harm sex workers who are providing legal and regulated sexual services in another.

Technology is also enabling new forces of coercion and control over workers. It is now easier than ever for businesses to track their employees' activity outside of work, and technology is being misused by businesses to control women workers' freedom to work for more than one employer, or to advertise their services using more than one online platform – many sites have introduced exclusivity clauses that penalise workers for using more than one platform.

#### Recommendations

- Member States must equal access to digital and online technologies for all, having particular regard to the needs of women in rural areas, with low socioeconomic status, and/or who have attained less formal education.
- Member States must ensure that all women have access to the internet and online communication tools, irrespective of their area of work, age, ethnicity, religious beliefs, political opinion, or sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Member States must recognise that technological advances in and of themselves will not combat trafficking and labour exploitation, and must instead focus on strategies that will truly empower workers to improve their labour conditions, such as creating opportunities for unionisation, and increasing access to education, well-paid and long-term jobs, and establishing regular migration pathways.
- Member States must refrain from using technology to interfere with the rights and freedoms of adult women who consensually sell sexual services, and permit women to use online platforms and communication technology to conduct their business.
- Member States must hold the private sector accountable for technological practices that interfere with the labour rights of women workers.

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