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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.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

The Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, a non-governmental organization working toward the elimination of sexual exploitation of women and girls and the realization of gender equality, affirms the need to examine the priority theme of women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work. Gender equality in employment continues to be a largely unrealized goal worldwide despite the existence of various international legal instruments, such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, and international agreements such as the Beijing Platform for Action.

Pervasive gender inequality and male violence against women and girls present ongoing challenges in achieving greater economic empowerment and independence for women and girls. All too frequently, women and girls are considered disposable commodities in the economy, valued for revenue and profit at the expense of human rights and gender equality. This is particularly true of policies that fuel women's and girl's exploitation in the sex trade, which a number of governments, inter-governmental organizations and other members of civil society have either formally or informally adopted and promoted. Viewing commercial sexual exploitation as a legitimate form of work hinders efforts to close global gender gaps in employment, including pay equity and discrimination.

Coalition Against Trafficking in Women is seriously concerned about the legitimization and normalization of the sex trade in the guise of women's economic empowerment. Prostitution, like many forms of sexual violence, arises from the historical subordination of women to men. The sex trade is built upon and maintains women's low social status and relegates women to the role of sexual merchandise. The more sexualization and objectification of women and girls in society becomes accepted and pervasive, the more challenging it is for women and girls to obtain equal treatment. Far from providing women with empowering employment opportunities, the proliferation of commercial sexual exploitation has the opposite effect: it perpetuates gender inequality, harming both those who are victimized within the sex trade and those who face sexual harassment, gender discrimination, and other forms of sexual violence as a result of the acceptability of viewing women as sexual objects to be bought and sold.

Participation in the sex trade is usually a result of a lack of options rather than a choice from among equally lucrative opportunities. No amount of money can be considered adequate compensation for an individual to tolerate a violation of her human rights. Governments must recognize the long lasting consequences on women and girls in the sex trade, which pose a risk regardless of whether prostitution is regulated, legalized or criminalized. Victims of sex trafficking and prostitution often suffer severe health consequences ranging from physical injuries inflicted by buyers, pimps and traffickers; psychological devastation, including trauma, depression, and suicide; HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases; and alcohol and drug abuse induced by pimps or women's attempts to avoid feeling violated. Women and girls suffering from these severe, long-term health problems are hindered in attaining equality and advancing their human rights, including in achieving long term economic independence.

One of the most profound examples of law or policy which severely impedes the attainment of gender equality is the tolerance, regulation, decriminalization and/or legalization of the sex trade, including the promotion of sex tourism. Commercial sexual exploitation is based in and reinforces “the historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women,” as recognized by the United Nations Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women, [A/RES/48/104](#), 23 Feb. 1994.

While these international agencies and some governments recognize that trafficking victims should be removed from the sex trade, they fail to acknowledge the enormous extent to which women and girls in the sex trade have been trafficked. The significant extent to which exploitation, particularly of children, occurs within the sex trade undermines the argument that prostitution should be labelled “sex work,” and recognized as a job. Additionally, it is a mistake to assume that those who were trafficked and sexually exploited as children are no longer trafficking victims but “voluntary workers” when they reach the age of 18 or that prostitution no longer poses the same harms to their well-being.

Prostitution trains men and boys, through the powerful “reinforce” of sexual stimulation, to view and treat women and girls in every arena of their lives as objects to be purchased and violated. The resulting beliefs and perceptions are not confined to sex trade victims but are directed against all girls and women — wives and girlfriends, female co-workers and employees, female acquaintances, and women and girls encountered on the street. While prostituted women and girls are the most directly and grievously harmed by governments that legalize and legitimize prostitution, all women suffer a lowering of their status and thus a violation of their human rights by pro-prostitution regimes. Prostitution perpetuates the degrading stereotype that women, by their inherent nature, are commodities or objects to be bought and sold, rather than persons with full human rights and dignity. It also reinforces attitudes and practices that perpetuate the sexual harassment of women throughout society, including in places of work. Sexual harassment in the workplace is a persistent and pervasive obstacle to women achieving economic independence, as women are abused by supervisors, co-workers and customers alike.

When establishments that promote prostitution are legal, men are encouraged to frequent them. The sex trade has expanded its reach to make sex clubs into facilities for business meetings and entertaining business partners and clients. Women executives and other employees are not likely to attend meetings at which the “entertainment” includes exploitation of women. The sex trade has thus created a new culture of men-only bonding through the collective abuse of women. This trend presents an obstacle to women’s advancement in business. The effectiveness of laws against sexual harassment and violence in the workplace is undermined by promoting a trade in which similar treatment of women and girls is part of the job description and when exploitation of women is used by men as a form of networking.

In order to promote the economic empowerment of women, the United Nations, governments and civil society must take action to eradicate sexual violence and exploitation of women and girls and refuse to characterize such human rights violations as work. We urge the following actions:

1. Make specific and local recommendations not only about ending particular forms of male violence but on transforming systemic social and economic structures such as patriarchy and harmful economic systems that unremittingly disadvantage women.
2. Eliminate, through laws and policies, those economic, social, legal and political structures that make women vulnerable to traffickers, pimps and buyers such as poverty, systematic male violence against women, discriminating economic policies and structural adjustment programs, gender discrimination, and other forms of oppression such as racism.
3. Eliminate laws that structurally support women's subordination (e.g., dowry, unequal marriage, inheritance and property laws).
4. Decriminalize women and girls in prostitution, while promoting laws penalizing buyers, pimps, brothel owners, and other traffickers who contribute to the demand that fuels the global market for sexual exploitation.
5. Educate law enforcement and criminal justice officials to investigate and prosecute crimes perpetrated by traffickers, pimps, and buyers against victims of prostitution and trafficking.
6. Adequately fund and support services for survivors of international and domestic trafficking and prostitution, including exit programs with financial assistance, education and job training, employment opportunities, housing, health services, legal advocacy, residency permits, and language training.
7. Implement coherent national policies that explicitly denounce prostitution as a violation of women's human rights and as violence against women, and reject its legalization.
8. Reject the use of the misleading term "sex work," which minimizes the abuses and exploitation of prostitution and attempts to redefine it as an ordinary job, particularly for impoverished and marginalized women.

Governments must not use short term economic measures, such as permitting and encouraging the proliferation of the sex trade, to address development and the feminization of poverty. Legitimization and normalization of the sex trade has a profoundly negative long-term impact on the human rights and dignity of all women and girls. Adopting such policies prevents societies from achieving the goal of gender equality and the economic empowerment of women.
