



Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women

Dear UN Women,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a contribution to your 'Consultation seeking views on UN Women approach to sex work, the sex trade and prostitution'.

This submission is made by the International Secretariat of the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW) and the member organisations listed as signatories at the end of this document.

Our alliance was established over twenty years ago to respond to the needs of people, in particular women, whose rights have been violated in the process of their labour migration. As feminists from both the global South and the global North, we share a deep concern for the rights and well-being of women who are trying to make a living for themselves and their families in a world increasingly characterised by inequality, globalisation, conflict, environmental degradation and precarious labour. In these constraining circumstances we have seen how women show extraordinary resilience and ingenuity in resisting oppression, claiming their rights and asserting their agency. Listening to women and trying to understand their aspirations and the complexities of their life journeys has been at the core of our work. We hope that in this consultation, UN Women will similarly be guided by the desires and experiences of the people whose lives will be directly affected by the policy you are developing – those currently working in the sex industry.

Since the establishment of our organisation, we have made a clear distinction between sex work (or 'prostitution') and human trafficking. While sex work is an income-generating activity and viewed as labour by those engaged in it, human trafficking and sexual exploitation are criminal acts and severe human rights violations. The conflation of sex work and trafficking trivialises trafficking and victimises, infantilises and patronises sex workers and creates a hostile atmosphere against them. It further weakens the legal, social and labour conditions of sex workers, making them more vulnerable to abuse from clients and law enforcement. These circumstances facilitate their dependency on pimps and managers and exacerbate their vulnerability to trafficking in the context of sex work. The conflation of sex work and trafficking ultimately blurs the understanding of human trafficking and impedes the identification of victims and prosecution of the criminals.

In response to the specific questions posed in your call for submissions:

1. The principles of universality and 'leaving nobody behind' mean, in relation to sex work, that sex workers – women, men and transgender people – are able to take equal part in all areas of civil and political life, including in the development of laws and policies that affect them. Unfortunately, the criminalised status of sex work in many countries and the persistent societal view of sex work as 'immoral' or as 'violence against women' mean that sex workers are left behind politicians, academics and activists who claim to know better how sex work should be addressed. Sex workers have been particularly left behind in the development of anti-trafficking policies and measures, despite their contribution to addressing abuses and trafficking in the sex industry. These measures have led to violations of their rights as ['Collateral Damage'](#), as GAATW documented almost 10 years ago. But sex workers from all

walks of life and working in all sectors of the industry are the true experts on the impacts of policies concerning the sex industry, including its regulation. We know from them that the decriminalisation of all aspects of consensual adult sex work is the only policy that helps them be recognised as rights-holders, as workers and as citizens and take active part in the political and social life of their communities. We have learnt this from listening to sex workers and walking with them in their struggle for rights and freedom from oppression.

2. The empowerment of women and girls begins with their equitable access to education, healthcare, property and work opportunities and removal of the patriarchal norms and attitudes that limit this access. In this sense, gender equality can be achieved through legislative and social measures that promote respect for and recognition of girls' and women's potential, as well as their contribution to economic and social life, including through their unpaid and care work. In terms of policies on sex work, we do not condone the participation of girls (children) in the sex industry. As for adult women, there are examples how the removal of criminal sanctions empowers women who sell sex. For instance, the decriminalisation of all aspects of sex work in New Zealand [has been successful](#) in empowering many women in the sex industry to report violence against them and has increased their trust in the police and justice system. Similarly, in the Netherlands the government runs [campaigns](#) encouraging sex workers and clients to report suspicions of trafficking and forced sex work to an anonymous hotline. These campaigns lead to [increases in reports](#) of such instances and the identification of victims and apprehension of suspects. Such initiatives are not possible in countries where sex work is criminalised and pushed out of sight or where it is framed as 'violence against women'. Thus the decriminalisation of all aspects of sex work contributes to the elimination of violence against women, including human trafficking.

In the current economic regime, sex work is for many women the best option to earn money to secure their livelihoods. Many engage in sex work only temporarily in order to pay for their education, raise their children, or make investments, which allows them to move on from sex work and pursue other life goals. In this way, sex work can contribute to women's ownership of land and assets and their economic empowerment. While we agree that the current global economic and social systems need significant change, so that no person feels that sex work is her/his only or best option to make a living, until this change comes, people engaged in sex work need to be able to work in an environment that ensures their safety and protection and recognises them as workers.

3. Stigma and discrimination are pervasive in the lives of all women as a result of patriarchal attitudes in society. Women in the sex industry are particularly affected by these attitudes which consider them as 'immoral', 'loose' or 'fallen' women, but also by some supposedly progressive attitudes that, ironically, consider them subdued, non-agential 'victims of male violence'. These views marginalise and disempower sex workers and impede their access to health and social services and the justice system and empower those who seek to exploit and harm them. As long as women are considered inferior to men, and as long as women in the sex industry are considered inferior or less equal to other women, they remain vulnerable to exploitation and abuse. The removal of stigma and discrimination against any group of people is a long process that takes time and requires concerted legislative and social measures. The decriminalisation of all aspects of consensual adult sex work can be one part of such a process, combined with social measures to promote acceptance of sex work as work and respect for the rights and dignity of sex workers. Such a process is a

requirement towards building peaceful and inclusive societies. Also importantly, the decriminalisation of sex work and removal of stigma has the potential to significantly reduce the number of HIV and STD infections among sex workers, according to leading experts in the field, including UNDP, WHO and the medical journal *The Lancet*. Thus, decriminalisation of sex work is important for the realisation of the right to health, including the reproductive rights of sex workers.

Finally, we would like to stress again the need for UN Women to meaningfully consult with sex workers and the organisations representing them in the development of this policy that may affect their lives, including their income, health and wellbeing. The policy should respond to the current needs and best interests of the people who sell sex and be grounded in sound evidence. In addition, UN Women should also take note of the extensive research on sex work and the rights of sex workers already done by other UN agencies and human rights organisations, such as the ILO, UNDP, UNAIDS, WHO, Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch.

Signatories:

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