Amnesty International

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Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations
Executive Director, UN Women

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Dear H.E. Mlambo-Ngcuka,

CONSULTATION SEEKING VIEWS ON UN WOMEN APPROACH TO SEX WORK, THE SEX TRADE AND PROSTITUTION
Thank you for the opportunity to respond in writing to the consultation on a potential policy position of UN Women on ‘sex work, the sex trade and prostitution’.

In May 2016 Amnesty International completed a three-year process to develop its own policy on ‘state obligations to respect, protect and fulfil the human rights of sex workers’. This process included a review of international human rights standards as well as academic, UN agency and other human rights-based evidence from around the world and a global consultation which involved our National Sections and Structures engaging with their members, external agencies, and rights holders. Amnesty International carried out research in four countries - Argentina, Hong Kong, Norway, and Papua New Guinea - resulting in reports. This lengthy and resource intensive process allowed us to consider this complex topic in depth, meaningfully engage with a wide range of stakeholders and gather a significant evidence base to inform our policy position.

Information on this process can be found here, and we would welcome the opportunity to discuss it and our work with UN Women.

In light of Amnesty International’s experience in this context, we recommend that UN Women extend the period of its consultation to allow for more comprehensive engagement with sex workers and other key stakeholders. We are concerned that the format and length of the consultation, which is based on consultation via an email address, employs technical UN language and is subject to a short two-month deadline for response, will not allow for broad and meaningful engagement as a significant proportion of sex workers, particularly in the global south, may not have easy access to the Internet. It also does not allow adequate time for sex worker groups to engage with their members and feed back to UN Women.

Our answers to the consultation questions are set out below. However, as an initial matter we would like to raise an over-arching issue, which we are unable to address in allotted word limit.

CONFLATION OF ADULT CONSENSUAL SEX WORK WITH HUMAN TRAFFICKING
The term “sex trade” is referred to in the consultation email. This term is unclear in meaning/definition and we are concerned that it inaccurately equates adult consensual sex work with trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation. Trafficking in persons, including into the sex sector, is not the same as sex work. Sex work refers to a contractual arrangement where sexual services are negotiated between
consenting adults with the terms of engagement agreed upon between the seller and the buyer.\(^1\) Trafficking is non-consensual. There is increasing evidence that when the two phenomena are conflated in law, policy and/or enforcement, this leads to harmful practices which violate human rights.

International standards recognise the distinction between adult consensual sex work and human trafficking. The delineation between “traffic in women” and “exploitation of prostitution” in the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination in Women (CEDAW) recognizes the two issues as distinct.\(^2\) The definition of human trafficking set out in the UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Trafficking Protocol) emerged from debates which centred on how to address consensual sex work.\(^3\) Those advocating for the inclusion of all prostitution as a form of trafficking in the Protocol’s definition argued that it is always inherently abusive and women cannot consent to it. This proposal would have undermined the framework of the trafficking definition – requiring the three elements of action, means and purpose to be present – and would have equated women in sex work with children, for whom the “means” of the trafficking definition does not apply. The Human Rights Caucus working at the negotiations of the Trafficking Protocol observed that “[s]uch a stance historically has ‘protected’ women from the ability to exercise their rights.”\(^4\) The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) has published an Issue Paper detailing that the UN Trafficking Protocol in Persons does not equate these issues.\(^5\)

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\(^2\) See also CEDAW General Recommendation 19 (violence against women), UN Doc. A/47/38, 1992, para. 16; CEDAW, Concluding Observations: Indonesia, UN Doc. CEDAW/C/IDN/CO/5, 2007, paras. 28-29.

\(^3\) See for example, A. Gallagher, ‘Human rights and the new UN Protocols on trafficking and migrant smuggling: A preliminary analysis’, *Human Rights Quarterly*, 2001, pp. 975–1004; J. Doezema, ‘Who gets to choose? Coercion, consent and the UN Trafficking Protocol’, *Gender and Development*, Vol. 10, No. 1, 2002; M. Ditmore and M. Wijers, ‘The negotiations on the UN Protocol on Trafficking in Persons’, *Nemesis*, 2003; J. Doezema, *Sex slaves and discourse masters: The construction of trafficking*, 2010. The split on the issue of prostitution/sex work amongst delegates and civil society groups in the negotiations exerted strong influence on the final text: “The focus on sex workers has however had tremendous influence on the trafficking debate also after the adoption of the Protocol, which is evident e.g. in the focus on trafficking of women and of women and children for sexual exploitation, a focus which is not necessarily promoting the human rights of trafficking victims, nor the fight against traffickers in the most effective way, as will be considered below.” UNESCO, K. Touzenis, *Trafficking in Human Beings: Human rights and transnational criminal law, developments in law and practices*, 2010, p.32. Debates about prostitution/sex work have emerged in many other negotiations where they have been used as a tactic by some states and non-state actors to undermine rights protections in the negotiations, including those at the Fourth World Conference on Women (1995), the UN General Assembly Special Session on HIV/AIDS in 2001, and the UN General Assembly Special Session on children in 2002. See International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission (IGLHRC) and the Center for Women’s Global Leadership (CWGL), C. Rothschild, S. Long and S. Fried, *Written out: How sexuality is used to attack women’s organizing*, 2005.


\(^5\) UNODC, *Issue paper: The concept of ‘exploitation’ in the Trafficking in Persons Protocol*, 2015, p.7. See also A.T. Gallagher, *The International Law of Human Trafficking*, 2010, p. 39 (“There was clear consensus within the drafting group that the Trafficking Protocol definition was not to extend to prostitution or pornography per se.”) This is supported by the Council of Europe, working from the Council of Europe Convention, which clarifies a distinction between the prostitution and trafficking in persons: “It must be clear that the forms of exploitation covered by the Convention are not limited to sexual exploitation. Moreover, trafficking in human beings differs from “prostitution” in that it is a new form of slavery which can include sexual exploitation, but not necessarily. Prostitution can only be qualified as “trafficking in human beings” if one of the actions e.g. “recruitment” and means, “threat or use of force referred to under at. 4 of the Convention have been used.” Statement by the Head of the Minorities, Media and Equality Department, Directorate General of Human Rights, Council of Europe as published in Proceedings from the regional seminar in Riga, 2006. Directorate General of Human Rights, Council
Conflation of human trafficking and consensual sex work creates confusion amongst practitioners, media and the public and can lead to harmful laws and policies that negatively impact trafficked persons, migrants, and sex workers, among others. Anti-trafficking organizations, including the Global Alliance Against Traffic in Women (GAATW), La Strada International, and the Freedom Network have documented the harm done to sex workers, entertainment workers, migrants, and others (including people who have been trafficked) by anti-trafficking laws, policies, programmes and initiatives that conflate sex work and trafficking. Additionally, such interventions can impede trafficked persons from reaching out for legal protection and support, and/or leaving commercial sex. For example, some states respond by restricting women’s rights, including their freedom of movement, in order to prevent trafficking in persons, particularly into the sex sector. The first two holders of the mandate of the UN Human Rights Council’s Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons, especially women and children have raised concerns about failures of the criminal justice system whereby trafficked persons are not identified and the principle of non-prosecution or non-punishment for status offences is breached; leading to the arrest, detention, of Europe, Strasbourg, 2007.


charge and prosecution of women for engaging in sex work.  

Anti-trafficking experts express concern that expanding the definition of trafficking in persons to include all cases of commercial sex undermines initiatives directed to ending trafficking by diluting attention and effort: “The equation of prostitution with trafficking…permits states to claim easy credit for virtually effortless arrests and prosecutions that do little or nothing to address those egregious forms of sexual exploitation that the Protocol was intended to challenge.” The Special Rapporteur on trafficking in persons has also urged that more attention be paid to the structural root causes of trafficking and has recognised that laws prohibiting sex work do not prevent trafficking and can discourage victims of trafficking from approaching police. 

Amnesty International encourages UN Women to reflect the legally recognized and practical distinctions between adult consensual sex work and trafficking in persons for sexual exploitation in any policy position and approach to these issues.

**QUESTION 1) THE 2030 AGENDA COMMTS TO UNIVERSALITY, HUMAN RIGHTS AND LEAVING NOBODY BEHIND. HOW DO YOU INTERPRET THESE PRINCIPLES IN RELATION TO SEX WORK/TRADE OR PROSTITUTION?**

Amnesty International considers recognition of the universality of human rights, realization of those rights and the principle of ‘leaving no one behind’ to be fundamental to any approach to sex work.

The full realization of sex workers’ human rights provides the means by which states can ensure that fewer women have to rely on sex work as a means of economic survival; that those who engage in sex work can have greater control over their working environments and secure protection from, and redress for, human rights violations and abuses against them, including violence and exploitation; and that women can leave sex work if, and when, they choose. The 2030 agenda provides a practical vehicle through which sex workers’ human rights can be realised. The fundamental premise of the SDGs that “no one will be left behind,” requires that sex workers should be fully included in the global development process. As such, there is an urgent need for states, UN agencies, international human rights bodies, and civil society to fully include sex workers in the development of effective laws, policies and practices that respect, protect and fulfil their human rights (SDG 16.7).

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Sex work is generally a highly stigmatized activity and sex workers routinely face prejudice, discrimination and human rights violations and abuses at the hands of state and non-state actors. Sex workers are frequently subjected to punishment, blame and social exclusion for transgressing social, sexual and gender norms or stereotypes and are excluded from policy-making. The negative impacts of legal and policy approaches to sex work and trafficking— including many which violate human rights— are also frequently excused or justified on the basis that they are crucial to the eradication of sex work and therefore in the ‘best interests’ of sex workers and/or gender equality. This approach directly contradicts the principle of universality and the aim of ‘leaving no one behind’.

Policies that aim to support and improve the situation of marginalized women must empower individuals and not compromise their safety or criminalize the contexts in which they live and work. It is crucial that international bodies, national governments and civil society respect the agency of sex workers and their decisions to engage in, remain in or leave sex work and recognise that they are best placed to help define the most appropriate mechanisms to maximize their own welfare and safety. Amnesty International considers that decriminalization of sex work is a necessary element of a human rights based approach to sex work.

**QUESTION 2) THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDGS) SET OUT TO ACHIEVE GENDER EQUALITY AND TO EMPOWER WOMEN AND GIRLS. THE SDGS ALSO INCLUDE SEVERAL TARGETS PERTINENT TO WOMEN’S EMPOWERMENT, SUCH AS**

A) **REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS**
B) **WOMEN’S OWNERSHIP OF LAND AND ASSETS**
C) **BUILDING PEACEFUL AND INCLUSIVE SOCIETIES**
D) **ENDING THE TRAFFICKING OF WOMEN**
E) **ELIMINATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN.**

**HOW DO YOU SUGGEST THAT POLICIES ON SEX WORK/TRADE/PROSTITUTION CAN PROMOTE SUCH TARGETS AND OBJECTIVES?**

The SDGs contain a range of targets that support the realization of women’s and girls’ human rights, including those who sell sex. Some sex workers make the decision to engage in sex work as a matter of preference: for some it can offer flexibility and control over working hours or higher pay than other options. For many, the decision to engage in sex work is a reflection of limited livelihood options. State responses to sex work that rely principally on enforcement of criminal laws against sex work to discourage and/or penalize those involved have a detrimental impact on sex workers’ human rights and do not offer support, or provide alternatives to people who sell sex.

States have obligations under international law to provide an adequate social safety net and address intersectional discrimination and structural inequalities to ensure that people do not have

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14 See Amnesty International reports, “What I’m doing is not a crime”: The human cost of criminalizing sex work in the City of Buenos Aires, Argentina (AMR 13/4042/2016); The human cost of ‘crushing’ the market: Criminalization of sex work in Norway, (EUR/36/4034/2016); Harmfully Isolated: Criminalizing sex work in Hong Kong (ASA 17/4032/2016); Outlawed and abused: Criminalizing sex work in Papua New Guinea (ASA 34/4030/2016).

15 See for example: The human cost of ‘crushing’ the market: Criminalization of sex work in Norway, (EUR/36/4034/2016)

16 The right of everyone to social security is recognized in international law, including in article 9 of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR).

17 Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, General Recommendation No. 28 on the Core
to rely on sex work as their means of survival. Additionally, Goals 1 to 8 of the SDGs set out multiple targets to achieve the economic empowerment of individuals affected by poverty and inequality, and ensure access to resources for women and girls that will increase and improve their choices and reduce the extent to which they lack options.

Additionally, SDG commitments to improve health, reduce maternal mortality, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive healthcare services (SDG 3.7 and 5.6) and end the HIV/AIDS epidemic (SDG 3.3) by 2030 are of central importance to sex workers who frequently report discrimination and exclusion from healthcare settings. Evidence collected by Amnesty and others indicates that criminalization undermines sex workers’ right to health services and information, in particular those relating to sexual and reproductive health and HIV; underlining global HIV prevention efforts. States have an immediate obligation to “repeal or eliminate laws, policies and practices that criminalize, obstruct or undermine [an] individual’s or particular group’s access to sexual and reproductive health facilities, services, goods and information.”

SDG target 5.2 aims to eliminate violence against all women and girls. This will not be achieved without consideration of the high levels of violence that sex workers experience from state and non-state actors. This violence is often a manifestation of the stigma directed towards sex workers and is compounded by criminal and other punitive laws and policies against sex work which inhibit sex workers’ ability to seek state protection from violence and/or compel them to operate in covert ways that compromise their safety.

For many sex workers, reporting crimes they experience means putting themselves at risk of criminalization and/or penalization on the basis of their involvement in sex work. This can lead to seizure of earnings, potential loss of livelihood through related sanctions and/or monitoring by the police to detect their clients. As a result, sex workers are frequently unable to seek redress for crimes.


18 For example: Progress in ending poverty (SDG 1) and hunger (SDG 2) and providing free, equitable and quality education (SDG 4), as well as, targets to ensure greater provision of social protection (SDG 5.4), access to economic resources (SDG 5a), employment (SDG 8.5)

19 See generally Global Commission on HIV and the Law, Risks, Rights and Health, 2012; UNAIDS Guidance Note on HIV and Sex Work, Annex 3; UNAIDS, UNFPA, UNDP, Sex Work and the Law in Asia and the Pacific, 2012; UNDP, UNFPA, APNSW, SANGRAM, The Right(s) Evidence: Sex, Violence and HIV in Asia – A Multi-country Qualitative Study, 2015. For example, Al’s research indicates that police in many countries frequently confiscate and cite the use of condoms as evidence of sex work offences, creating a disincentive to their use and further jeopardizing the right to the highest attainable standard of health. See Amnesty International reports, The human cost of ‘crushing’ the market: Criminalization of sex work in Norway (EUR/36/034/2016); Harmfully Isolated: Criminalizing sex work in Hong Kong (ASA 17/4032/2016); Outlawed and abused: Criminalizing sex work in Papua New Guinea (ASA 34/4030/2016). See also Open Society Foundations, Criminalizing Condoms, How policing practices put sex workers and HIV services at risk in Kenya, Namibia, Russia, South Africa, the United States and Zimbabwe, 2012; Human Rights Watch, Sex Workers at Risk: Condoms as Evidence of Prostitution in Four U.S. Cities, 2012; M.H. Wurth et al., ‘Condoms as Evidence of Prostitution in the United States and the Criminalization of Sex Work’, Journal of the International AIDS Society, 2013.

20 CESC, General Comment 22 (UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/22), 2016, para. 49(a). The UN Committee on Economic Social and Cultural Rights indicates that states must specifically ensure that sex workers have access to the full range of sexual and reproductive health care services See CESC, General Comment 22 (UN Doc. E/C.12/GC/22), 2016, para. 32.

21 See for example: Amnesty International reports, “What I’m doing is not a crime”: The human cost of criminalizing sex work in the City of Buenos Aires, Argentina (AMR 13/4042/2016); The human cost of...
committed against them; offering impunity to perpetrators. In addition, the stigmatized and criminalized status that sex workers experience provides law enforcement officials in many countries with the opportunity to harass, extort and perpetrate physical and sexual violence against them, also often with impunity. When they are not threatened with criminalization/penalization, sex workers are better able to collaborate with law enforcement to identify perpetrators of violence and abuse, including human trafficking.

Laws that criminalize the buying of sex or organization of sex work, such as brothel-keeping or solicitation laws, often force sex workers to work in ways that compromise their safety. Bans on buying sex can lead sex workers to take risks to protect their clients from detection by police, such as visiting locations determined by their clients. Laws prohibiting the organization of sex work often ban sex workers from working together or with security or support staff or renting secure premises; leaving them open to prosecution and penalties if they try to operate in safety.

SDG 5.2 calls for elimination of trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation. Human trafficking amounts to a grave human rights abuse and states have an obligation under international human rights and criminal law to ensure that it is recognized as a criminal offence and to guarantee effective legal protections against it. States must investigate, prosecute and bring traffickers to justice and guarantee victims access to justice and reparation.

Amnesty recommends that in promoting human rights and the SDGs, UN Women should recognise the multiple realities of women’s lives, their autonomy to make decisions and should fully involve sex workers in its work. We would also strongly recommend against endorsing criminal and punitive approaches that in practice compromise the safety of sex workers and lead to human rights violations

‘crushing’ the market: Criminalization of sex work in Norway (EUR/36/4034/2016); Harmfully Isolated: Criminalizing sex work in Hong Kong (ASA 17/4032/2016); Outlawed and abused: Criminalizing sex work in Papua New Guinea (ASA 34/4030/2016).


I. U. Bjørndah, Dangerous Liaisons: A report on the violence women in prostitution in Oslo are exposed to, Oslo, 2012.
QUESTION 3) THE SEX TRADE IS GENDERED. HOW BEST CAN WE PROTECT WOMEN IN THE TRADE FROM HARM, VIOLENCE, STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION?

As previously stated, Amnesty has serious concerns regarding use of the phrase ‘sex trade’.

Women face entrenched gender discrimination and structural inequalities in most societies. Women bear a disproportionate burden of poverty and make up the majority of sex workers globally.27 Multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination have an impact on the lives of many sex workers and can play a role in an individual’s decision to engage or remain in sex work, as well as their experiences in sex work. Under international human rights law, states have an obligation to combat sex and other forms of direct and indirect discrimination, and ensure that the human rights of all individuals are equally respected, protected and fulfilled.28 States have a broad obligation to take measures to challenge stereotypes that objectify women29 and should achieve this end through measures that do not infringe human rights.

Women who sell sex are frequently subjected to harmful gender stereotypes on account of being perceived to transgress traditional notions of what is acceptable sexual behaviour for women.30 Stigmatization of sex work is also frequently informed by, and enmeshed in racist and colonialist notions of the racialized, sexualized “Other” and/or heteronormative prejudices. Rather than seeking to end violence and combat stigma and discrimination through criminalizing sex work, states should utilize human rights-based measures to challenge stereotypes, such as education and awareness

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28 The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR); the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD); the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC); and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD); and the International Convention on the Rights of all Migrant Workers and Members of their Families (CMW), between them comprehensively prohibit discrimination on all grounds, including age, race, caste, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, and migrant status. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) requires governments to address specifically discrimination against women and guarantee substantive equality in all areas.

29 Article 5a Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

Amnesty supports UN Women’s aim of developing a policy on sex work which promotes human rights and recognises the role of gender discrimination in the lives of many sex workers. Recognition of the multi-layered discrimination that many sex workers experience should not detract from the fact that women who are sex workers can and do exercise agency. We would also recommend that UN Women strongly oppose punishing or endangering sex workers through criminalization of sex work and instead support concerted action to confront the structural conditions that can lead women to do sex work and contribute to gender inequalities, violence and discrimination more broadly.

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31 For example immediate measures may include reforming discriminatory laws, policies and practices; introducing temporary special measures; building the capacity of state institutions to combat discrimination and promote equality; and public education and awareness-raising programmes and initiatives to promote the enjoyment of the full range of human rights for all, in particular for people at risk of discrimination and marginalization.