



EUROPEAN WOMEN'S  
**LOBBY**  
EUROPEEN DES FEMMES

Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka  
European Women's Lobby  
18 Rue Hydraulique  
Brussels  
Belgium

Thursday 24 October 2013

Dear Dr. Mlambo-Ngcuka,

**Re: UN Women recent note on sexual exploitation**

We haven't yet had the pleasure to meet, but I am writing to you both as member of the UN Women Global Civil Society Advisory Group and as the Secretary General of the European Women's Lobby (EWL). The EWL is the largest representative umbrella organisation of women's associations in the European region gathering more than 2000 women's organisations in 31 countries.

I am writing to you regarding the recently disseminated UN Women note on "sex work, sexual exploitation and trafficking", which I was quite surprised and shocked about. I therefore wanted to ask you whether this truly represent the official UN Women's position, as we at the EWL think that such a position, coming from an institution which aims to empower women and protect their rights, would have a seriously detrimental impact on women's lives throughout the world.

Legitimising and recognising 'sex work' as a form of work is a very serious political positioning and we think it is legitimizing violence against women and the commodification of women's body and sexuality. UN Women is the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, the creation of which we supported with all our strength. We therefore do not understand that the note does not refer at all to gender equality or women's rights, and does not make any analysis of the impact of the system of prostitution on gender equality and on women's empowerment. It is shocking for us that the note does not take into consideration the rape and other forms of violence that the millions of women and girls in prostitution worldwide experience every day.

From a policy point of view, this note does not take into consideration the experience of different countries, including in Europe, which have put in place different legal systems to deal with prostitution, showing that the normalisation of prostitution and legalisation of



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pimping has brought more vulnerability for prostituted persons. The note also does not take into account the views of the many civil society organisations, which do not support this position.

We would like to also stress that the note goes against key human rights instruments on women's rights and ignores some existing conventions, such as the Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, adopted by the UN General assembly on 2 December 1949. It is incomprehensible for us that UN Women can potentially support positions that are directly in opposition to their standards on such a sensitive issue.

We are aware that the so called "sex workers" movement is pushing at all levels for such a positioning and think that women and girls in prostitution should in no way be criminalized, but on the contrary, that their rights to be protected from all forms of violence and human rights violation should be promoted. Trivializing "sex work" ignores and silences the voice of the most vulnerable women and girls and legitimizes the buying, mostly by men, of women's sexuality and body in a way that also jeopardises all other efforts to promote women's empowerment and the fight against prejudicial gender stereotypes. It is also time to listen to survivors, who from bitter experience share this insight, as explained for example by Rachel Moran, survivor of prostitution from Ireland who is working with the EWL on this issue: "what is bought and sold in prostitution is not sex. It is sexual abuse. Prostitution is the commercialization of sexual abuse".

We would be happy to have your feedback and clarification on this matter as we are most concerned about the impact such note will have on the protection of women's rights, especially the most vulnerable women and girls.

Many thanks in advance.

With kind regards,

Cécile Gréboval  
EWL Secretary General