



EXPERT STATEMENT

EUROPEAN 'PIMP STATES' OPPOSE PROTECTING VULNERABLE WOMEN FROM ABUSE OF PROSTITUTION

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“Prostitution reduces women and girls to mere commodities and perpetuates a system of discrimination and violence that hinders their ability to achieve true equality.” - Reem Alsalem, UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences.

21 June 2024, 56th Session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva, UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women presented a groundbreaking [report](#) highlighting the pervasive violence against women and girls perpetuated in the system of prostitution.

The report unequivocally condemns the complicity of "pimp states" who legalise and profit from the exploitation of prostitution, including several EU States, criticising their failure to protect vulnerable groups from sexual exploitation.

In her report, UN Special Rapporteur rejects the notion that decriminalisation of pimping and buying of sexual acts is a viable solution to violence in prostitution. The report underscores that such an approach fails to address the root causes and systemic violence inherent to prostitution, perpetuating impunity of perpetrators and leaving behind the most vulnerable.

Despite the overwhelming substantive evidence presented, during the Interactive Dialogue between the Special Rapporteur and UN States, several EU states - notably, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Croatia and Switzerland - chose to ignore it, instead citing he perspectives of those actors in the system of prostitution who benefit from its exploitation.

This approach effectively instrumentalises the views of the few who derive profit from prostitution to perpetuate a system that accumulates wealth from the exploitation of marginalised and underprivileged women, neglecting the overwhelming majority who endure coercion and violence in prostitution.

As it was noted by the Special Rapporteur in her response, “by continuing to focus on a tiny minority who say they are free in prostitution, when compared to all women and girls that have been victims of prostitution, **we hold women and girls hostage to no action**, and allow States and societies to get away with addressing underlying causes that push women and girls into prostitution”.

Alsalem's report urges these states to reconsider their positions and align with abolitionist frameworks that prioritise the protection and dignity of all individuals, ensuring comprehensive support and pathways to exit exploitative situations.

The concept of "pimp states" implicates states, notably from the “global north”, that perpetuate systems that exploit vulnerable women and girls through prostitution and pornography.

These states, often characterised by their advanced economies, profit from the exploitation of prostitution of marginalised groups, including migrant, minority, and economically disadvantaged women and girls.

By failing to adopt abolitionist measures and instead actively advocating for decriminalisation and regulation of pimping, **these states advance deeply regressive, patriarchal, anti-human-rights frameworks, normalising an archaic sexist vision of a society and women's stereotyped inferior role in it, perpetuating sex inequality and violence against women and girls**, which can constitute human rights violations expressly prohibited in international and EU law, notably CEDAW Articles 1 and 5, TFEU 83 and EU Charter Articles 21 and 23. These states have circumvented international conventions and ignored their obligations to address the root causes of prostitution of women, such as pervasive structural inequalities between women and men, women's disadvantaged economic position, and sex, ethnic and racial discrimination.

While European states have conflicting legal approaches to the issue, not all states in Europe subscribe to exploitative models on prostitution. **Sweden, Norway, France, Republic of Ireland, Northern Ireland and Iceland have adopted an abolitionist approach. In their response to the report, the latter presented their position on behalf of the Nordic Baltic States, going beyond the countries that outlawed pimping and purchase of sexual acts. France too unequivocally reaffirmed their abolitionist stance on prostitution.**

The European Union's stance during the interactive dialogue was baffling, if not entirely inappropriate. Instead of reflecting the Union's overall undecided position on prostitution, the EU delegation, in their response to the report, decided to implicitly side with the "pimp states". As a consequence, the EU response omitted the European Parliament's crucial resolutions on prostitution (of 2014 and 2023) which advocate for an abolitionist approach and recognise prostitution as a form of violence against women. These resolutions should have been central to any EU position on the topic at global level.

Instead, the EU delegation dismissed the overwhelming evidence of the harms of prostitution to women exploited in it and the principles of equality between women and men enshrined in the EU law addressed in the EP resolutions. Equally, the EU statement ignored the newly amended directive on Trafficking, which preamble now recommends criminalisation of purchase of sexual acts by EU states.

The EU's failure to acknowledge these legal and normative frameworks discloses a reluctance to confront the systemic issues perpetuating sexual exploitation, preferring instead to endorse policies that normalise the commodification of women and girls. This oversight undermines efforts to protect vulnerable individuals and contradicts the EU's announced objectives to build a "Union of Equality", as well as its obligations under international human rights law, casting serious doubts on its commitment to genuinely combating violence against women and girls and upholding the rights of all women across the EU.

A comprehensive overview of legal approaches to prostitution is not the only aspect of Special Rapporteur's report. **The use of precise and appropriate terminology, as recommended by Reem Alsalem, is crucial in addressing the issue of prostitution and sexual exploitation.**

Alsalem highlights that terms such as "sex work" can trivialise the severe violence inflicted on those involved in prostitution. Instead, it is imperative to adopt language that accurately reflects the reality of the exploitation, violence, and coercion that is prostitution. This distinction is not merely semantic; it shapes the legal, social, and political frameworks within which policies are developed and implemented.



By using terms that recognise the exploitative nature of prostitution, we ensure that the focus remains on protecting the victims, holding perpetrators accountable, and dismantling the systems that perpetuate such abuses. This clarity in language fosters a more truthful and effective dialogue on human rights and aligns with international legal standards while prioritising the dignity and well-being of all individuals.

A Comprehensive and Transparent Consultation :

- The report is the culmination of extensive consultations with over 300 contributions from 60 countries across 7 regions, including UN agencies, CSO, and affected women.
- Multiple online consultations facilitated direct dialogue among women in prostitution, survivors, and stakeholders worldwide, ensuring diverse perspectives were heard.
- Special Rapporteur personally presided over discussions, ensuring robust participation and a comprehensive exploration of the issues at hand, including the systemic violence and exploitation within the sex trade.
- Contributions and submissions were meticulously reviewed and published, enhancing transparency and accountability throughout the consultation process.

Key Findings of the Report:

- The report identifies prostitution as a system of violence and exploitation that disproportionately affects marginalised and vulnerable women and girls from low-income backgrounds, displaced, migrants, and minorities.
- It highlights pervasive violence and abuse inherent to prostitution, where coercion, physical violence, and psychological manipulation are common, negating any notion of voluntary participation.

- The report underscores significant health damage inflicted on women in prostitution, including high rates of SRHR, mental health and physical injuries.
- It challenges the notion of consent within prostitution, arguing that economic coercion and societal pressures undermine any semblance of genuine choice, particularly for those from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds.
- The report advocates for an abolitionist approach that prioritises the criminalisation of buyers and pimps while decriminalising those in prostitution, coupled with comprehensive support services and exit strategies
- The report highlights how the proliferation of pornography, included AI generated content, perpetuates harmful stereotypes, distorts healthy sexual norms, and contributes to the objectification and exploitation of women and girls globally. Pornography constitutes sexual exploitation, a filmed form of prostitution.

The report concludes that States should decriminalise prostitution for women and girls, who must be treated as victims, provide comprehensive support and exit pathways, as well as criminalise the purchase of sexual acts, and apply stringent actions against pimping. Anti-trafficking policies that create an artificial distinction between ‘forced’ and ‘free’ prostitution should not be misused.



The report underscores the urgent necessity for a **global abolitionist approach to effectively combat the pervasive violence and exploitation inherent in prostitution**. Such exploitation leaves victims without viable alternatives, perpetuating cycles of vulnerability and harm. An abolitionist framework is crucial not only to dismantle the structures that perpetuate this exploitation but also to ensure that all individuals, regardless of background, are protected from the grave human rights violations inherent in prostitution.

European Network of Migrant Women calls on:

- **Civil Society, Human Rights Defenders and Activists** to mobilise for the adoption of policies grounded in women's human rights, and not to leave behind the overwhelming majority of vulnerable women and girls exploited in prostitution and pornography.
- **UN Member States** to implement UN Special Rapporteur's recommendations, prioritising the abolitionist approach, holding perpetrators to account and safeguarding vulnerable populations.
- **UN Agencies, Bodies and Special Procedures** to return to adopted by states legally binding international framework on women's human rights and to incorporate the terminology and principles advocated by Alsalem into all relevant frameworks and actions.
- **European Union** to recognise and act upon the findings of the report, which align with the previous crucial resolutions of the European Parliament on prostitution.

Reem Alsalem's report challenges the status quo, demanding a reevaluation of how societies address the exploitation of women and girls. It calls for an immediate shift towards policies that uphold dignity, human rights, and equality for all.

The time for action is now.

For more information:

- **Watch the presentation of the report at the UNSRVAWG interactive dialogue with states:** [HRC 56th Session 21 June 2024](#) and [HRC 56th Session 24 June 2024](#)
- **Watch the UN Special Rapporteur's press conference :** [HRC – Press conference: UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls | UN Web TV](#)
- **Read the report in UN languages:** [A/HRC/56/48 \(undocs.org\)](#).

