

June 16, 2022

The Hon. Antony J. Blinken, Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary of State Blinken:

We write to express our ongoing distress regarding the U.S. State Department’s increasing use of terminology that supports the legalization and decriminalization of the sex trade, including the term “sex work.”

On May 27, 2022, U.S. Ambassador to Uganda Natalie E. Brown [delivered prepared remarks](#) in Kampala at the launch of the USAID-supported report, “Legal Environment Assessment for HIV and AIDS in Uganda.” In the context of discussing Ugandan laws, Amb. Brown said:

“...**the laws which criminalize sex work...** and drug possession reinforce social stigma and fuel harassment of persons living with HIV....” (Emphasis added).

This is not the first time Amb. Brown used such terminology. Other instances include her comments on [December 1, 2021](#), World AIDS Day, and during a program site visit [March 1, 2022](#) as read on her Twitter account @USAmbUganda.

“Sex work” is a euphemism for the sex trade, the architecture of a global multi-billion-dollar criminal network that includes commercial sex establishments (brothels, “massage parlors,” strip clubs, escort services, etc.), its owners and managers, and other third-party exploiters. The term is not defined under U.S. state laws, federal law, or international laws.ⁱ It is the banner waved by those endorsing the legalization and decriminalization of the system of prostitution.

The U.S. Government is clear in its opposition to prostitution, including pimping, pandering, or maintaining commercial sex establishments, stating that “it should not be regulated as a legitimate form of work for any human being.” Further, National Security Presidential Directive 22 (NSPD 22) states, “Prostitution and related activities, which are inherently harmful and dehumanizing, contribute to the phenomenon of trafficking in persons, as does sex tourism.”ⁱⁱ

The U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act recognizes that those patronizing prostitution, colloquially known as sex buyers, are intrinsically part of the mechanisms of sex trafficking.ⁱⁱⁱ They almost single-handedly fill the coffers of traffickers and exploiters with the dollars they spend to purchase sexual acts. Legalizing prostitution not only increases trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation but also fails to recognize the pervasive harm^{iv} these sex buyers cause the people they purchase, who are overwhelmingly women and girls and vulnerable LGBTQ+ youth.

In your own remarks, Mr. Secretary, delivered on July 1, 2021, at the virtual launch ceremony of the 2021 [Trafficking in Persons Report](#), you referred to sex trafficking victims as individuals “compelled into commercial sex work” when discussing trafficking victims.^v The 2021 TIP Report has five references to “sex work,” including when referring to sex trafficked children.^{vi}

Our alarm generated by your statement, and by the TIP Report’s inclusion of the term “sex work” and its implications, led many of the undersigned to send a letter, hereby attached, to relevant Senate and House committees in September 2021. We will not repeat its content here for the sake of space.

A state that legalizes and decriminalizes the sex trade is a state that fails to ensure a person’s fundamental human rights to health, physical autonomy, and to live a life free from violence and discrimination.

We respectfully urge you to remind your staff in the U.S. and abroad of these anti-trafficking laws and policies to ensure that the terms “sex work” and “sex worker” are no longer used in official statements and reports.

We, the undersigned, collectively fight for a world in which every human being, including the most marginalized among us, can live in safety and dignity without trafficking and related exploitation, and without being purchased for sexual acts. We trust that the United States will continue to lead in its efforts to creating such a world.

We remain available for any further discussion on this issue. Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

U.S. Organizations and Advocates

Staci Yates
Alaska Stop Human Trafficking Alliance
Alaska

Stacey Sutherland
Arizona Anti-Trafficking Network
Arizona

Nancy Baldwin
Hickey Family Foundation
Arizona

Amy Engle
Survivor Leader
Arizona

Kevin Metcalf
National Child Protection Task Force
Arkansas

Mary Bawden
Dance Awareness: No Child Exploited
California

Rima Nashashibi
Global Hope 365
California

Annika Huff
Survivor Leader
California

Vanessa Russell
Love Never Fails
California

Marti MacGibbon
Mentari
California

Tiara King
Retrain The Night
California

Alia Dewees
Safe House Project
California

Christine Cesa
Survivor Leader
California

Esther Goetsch
Truckers Against Trafficking
Colorado

Mary Speta
Amirah, Inc.
Massachusetts & Connecticut

Amanda Mendoza
Individual Advocate
Delaware

Yolanda Schlabach
Zoe Ministries
Delaware

Jan Edwards
Paving the Way Foundation, Inc.
Florida

Janet Ortenzo
Southwest Florida Coalition Against
Human Trafficking
Florida

Tania Haigh
Parents Against Child Sex Abuse / KIDS
TOO
Illinois

Lucy Bloom
Veronica's Voice
Kansas

Margaret Cairns
Maryland Coalition Against Pornography
Maryland

Nicole Bell
Living In Freedom Together, Inc. (LIFT)
Massachusetts

Autumn Burris
Survivors for Solutions
Colorado

Angie Henderson
University of Northern Colorado
Colorado

Heather McLeod
Human Trafficking Interagency
Coordinating Council
Delaware

Alicia Cohen
Survivors Against Familial Exploitation
Delaware

Barb Bollinger
Path2Freedom
Florida

Melissa Farley
Prostitution Research and Education
California

Judi Riccio
Faithful Love
Georgia

Russ Tuttle
The Stop Trafficking Project, Inc.
Kansas

Jeanette Westbrook
Women Graduates USA
Kentucky

Cherie Jimenez
EVA Center
Massachusetts

Janice Raymond
University of Massachusetts Amherst
Massachusetts

Margaret Meyer
United States Catholic Sisters Against
Human Trafficking
Massachusetts

Kimberly Hogan
University of Southern Mississippi
Mississippi

Peni Hoagland
Individual Advocate
Montana

Penny Ronning
Yellowstone County Area Human
Trafficking Task Force
Montana

Jessica Cisneros
Awaken
Nevada

Drisha Fernandes
Individual Advocate
New Hampshire

Lori Cohen
ECPAT USA
New York

Lynn Shaw
Lynn's Warriors
New York

Deborah Kuehner
The Potter's Hands Foundation, Inc.
New York

Jane Manning
Women's Equal Justice Project
New York

Dawn Ferrer
A Safe Place
North Carolina

Suzanne Brown
Individual Advocate
Michigan

Dan Nash
Human Trafficking Training Center
Missouri

Stephanie Anderson
Traffick Refuge
Montana

Lisa Boettcher
Recovery Montana
Montana

Rebecca Parrow
Individual Advocate
Nevada

Taina Bien-Aimé
Coalition Against Trafficking in Women
New York

Tori Curbelo
Lifeway Network
New York

Cristian Eduardo
Survivor Leader
New York

Shandra Woworuntu
Mentari
New York

Lauren Hersh
World Without Exploitation
New York

Abbie Arena
Gate Beautiful
North Carolina

Queen Degraphenreid
National Council of Negro Women, Inc.
North Carolina

Allysa Mckenzie
Stand Against Trafficking USA
North Carolina

Joyclyn Bell
Northwest Survivors Alliance
Oregon

Abbie Newman
Mission Kids Child Advocacy Center
Pennsylvania

Shea Rhodes
Institute to Address Commercial Sexual
Exploitation at Villanova University
Charles Widger School of Law
Pennsylvania

Donna Hughes
Dignity Journal
Pennsylvania

Robert Healy
South Carolina Legislative Roundtable
South Carolina

Tiffani Price
GloryB
Texas

Toni Mckinley
Survivor Leader
Texas

Maggie Kerrin
New Englanders Against Sexual
Exploitation
Vermont

Pam Strickland
North Carolina Stop Human Trafficking
North Carolina

Taylor Venezuela
Survivor Leader
Ohio

Erica Billick
Living in Liberty
Pennsylvania

Elizabeth Downing
National Council of Jewish Women
Pennsylvania

Meaghan Patterson
Dawn's Place
Pennsylvania

Dena Rapp
Rivers of Justice
South Carolina

Linsey Fasold
Survivor Leader
South Dakota

Rita Hernandez
Rescue Freedom International
Texas

Lauren Grogan
The Jensen Project
Texas

Austin Ruse
Center for Family and Human Rights
Virginia

Twiss Butler
Advocate Leader
Virginia

Felicia Ingram
Prevention Works Joint Task Force &
Coalition
Virginia

Jeri Moomaw
Innovations Human Trafficking
Collaborative
Washington

Desiree Lepsey
iSeeYou Initiative
Washington

Deborah Sigmund
Innocents at Risk
Washington, DC

Dawn Hawkins
National Center on Sexual Exploitation
Washington, DC

Yasmin Vafa
Rights4Girls
Washington, DC

Linda Smith, former Member of Congress
Shared Hope International
Washington & Washington, DC

Tiffany Buell
Survivor Leader
Wisconsin

International Organizations and Advocates

Susana Chiarotti
Insgenar
Argentina

Tegan Larin
Coalition Against Trafficking in Women
Australia

Caroline Sander
Herzwerk - Initiative for People in
Prostitution
Austria

Anna Zobnina
European Network of Migrant Women
Belgium

Viviane Teiteibaum
Feminist Observatory of Violence Against
Women
Belgium

Megan Walker
Individual Advocate
Canada

Nela Pamukovic
Centre for Women War Victims - ROSA
Croatia

Yves Scelles
Fondation Scelles
France

Annie Sugier
Ligue du droit International des Femmes
France

Elda Carly
Equipes d'Action Contre le Proxénétisme
France

Silvia Reckermann
Bündnis Nordisches Modell
Germany

Christa Stolle
TERRE DES FEMMES e.V.
Germany

Irene Fereti
Greek League for Women's Rights
Greece

Chiara Carpita
Resistenza Femminista
Italy

Esohe Aghatise
Associazione Iroko Onlus
Italy

Ghada Jabbour
KAFA (Enough) Violence & Exploitation
Lebanon

Violet Oleh
IROKO Charity Organization
Nigeria

Polona Kovac
Society Kljuc - Centre for Fight Against
Trafficking in Human Beings
Slovenia

Karin Werkman
Feminism & Human Rights
Sweden

Lilian Halls-French
Initiative Feministe EuroMed
France

Alyssa Ahrabare
Osez le féminisme !
France

Marie Merklinger
SPACE International
Germany

Ingeborg Kraus
Trauma and Prostitution
Germany

Ruth Breslin
Sexual Exploitation Research Programme
at the University College Dublin
Ireland

Maria Ludovica Bottarelli Tranquilli-Leali
Italian Coordination of the European
Women's Lobby
Italy

Roseline Iroghama Aghatise
Associazione DORAD
Italy

Anna Borg
Malta Women's Lobby
Malta

Ana Sofia Fernandes
Portuguese Platform for Women's Rights
Portugal

Susana Martínez Novo
Comisión para la Investigación de los
Malos Tratos a Mujeres
Spain

Gertrud Åström
Östersjöfred
Sweden

ⁱ The Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, which the U.S. has ratified: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/protocol-prevent-suppress-and-punish-trafficking-persons>.

ⁱⁱ National Security Presidential Directive, December 16, 2002, <https://irp.fas.org/offdocs/nspd/nspd-22.pdf>.

ⁱⁱⁱ The Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Act defines sex trafficking as “the recruitment, harboring, transportation, provision, **obtaining, patronizing, or soliciting** of a person for the purpose of a commercial sex act.” (*emphasis added*), 22 USC 7102(12)

^{iv} Farley, Melissa; Banks, Martha E.; Ackerman, Rosalie J.; and Golding, Jacqueline M. (2018) "Screening for Traumatic Brain Injury in Prostituted Women," *Dignity: A Journal of Analysis of Exploitation and Violence*: Vol. 3: Iss. 2, Article 5. <https://doi.org/10.23860/dignity.2018.03.02.05>.

^v U.S. Department of State Secretary Antony J. Blinken at the 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report Launch Ceremony, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-the-2021-trafficking-in-persons-report-launch-ceremony/>

^{vi} “Other women reported they had grown up in brothels because their mothers were engaged in commercial sex, and brothel owners forced them into sex work when they were children.” United States Department of State, 2021 Trafficking in Persons Report, Bangladesh, June 2021, available at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/TIPR-GPA-upload-07222021.pdf>