

Associazione Iroko's Statement on 18th October 2020, European Union Anti-Trafficking Day: End Demand to End Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation

Human trafficking is, by its very nature, an extremely difficult phenomenon to measure, and the data on the number of identified victims inevitably gives an incomplete picture of the scale of the problem. Between 2017 and 2018, a total of 74,514 victims of trafficking were detected in over 110 countries. The US Department of State reports 105,7876 identified victims worldwide in 2019, showing a clear increase year on year. The estimated total number of victims is much higher, with the ILO putting it at more than 40 million in 2016. Trafficking disproportionately affects **women and girls**, who - according to UNODC data - **represent 72% of detected victims of trafficking globally**. Moreover, **sexual exploitation is the predominant form of trafficking**.

Of the victims of trafficking identified and assisted in Italy in 2017 and 2018, 89% were victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation¹, and a similar trend plays out across Europe². Globally, **women and girls represent 94% of those trafficked for sexual exploitation**. This is not the only gendered element of trafficking, as it is overwhelmingly a crime committed *by men*. Almost **80% of those convicted of trafficking crimes in Western and Central Europe were men**³. The rates of prosecutions and convictions are extremely low, indicating that traffickers are able to avoid justice and detection by evolving and adapting. Trafficking is considered a low risk, high profit crime⁴.

¹ [Italy - United States Department of State](#)

² UNODC GLOBAL REPORT ON TRAFFICKING IN PERSONS 2018
https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTIP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf

³ ibid

⁴ [ODIHR and UN Women's GUIDANCE Addressing Emerging Human Trafficking Trends and Consequences of the COVID-19 Pandemic](#)



During the current pandemic, victims of trafficking are at even greater risk. There are concerns that they will not seek medical assistance for COVID-19 due to fear of administrative detention deriving from their irregular migration status. Those in detention settings may not be identified due to lack of access for NGOs that conduct monitoring. Border closures and a lack of coordination between states leave those who wish to return to their country of origin in a kind of limbo. **“Some survivors of trafficking reported an increase in domestic violence, economic insecurity, and fear of traffickers released from prison due to COVID-19.** Furthermore, many [victims of trafficking], who are desperate to “repay” their growing debts to traffickers, continue to be charged by their traffickers for rent and food during the pandemic, they are being forced to engage in high-risk activities, such as exploitative informal labor, prostitution or the production of pornography online.”⁵

Many countries and international bodies have policies in place to tackle human trafficking but, as the UNODC and US State Department data above shows, the figures continue to rise. So **what does trafficking for sexual exploitation really mean? People - largely women and girls - trafficked into the commercial sex trade, where (overwhelmingly) men pay for unfettered access to their bodies.** And what can be done to combat this crime?

One logical approach is to reduce the potential profit for traffickers, by reducing the size of the ‘market’ for these exploited people, in other words reducing the demand. But discouraging demand for ‘sexual services’ specifically from victims of trafficking - as opposed to all prostituted persons - is, in practice, impossible to separate from the demand for ‘sexual services’ in general. This is because the buyers of such ‘services’ do not distinguish between victims of trafficking and the so-called ‘voluntary’ prostituted women. Laws targeting buyers *only* in situations of trafficking have been shown to be ineffective, as in the 2014 research study carried out in the Republic of Ireland, Finland, Lithuania, Bulgaria and Cyprus⁶. The report found that **“buyers rarely consider human trafficking when purchasing sex**, irrespective of their knowledge of the issue or laws criminalising the purchase of sex from trafficking victims”. One **buyer** stated:

“I will think about whether she is clean. I will not think about whether she has been trafficked. This is not my concern.”⁷

Liliam Altuntas, a survivor of trafficking for sexual exploitation, knows only too well about the attitudes of **sex-buyers** and she confirms that they **“aren’t interested in whether a prostituted woman is a victim of trafficking or not.”**

We wholeheartedly agree with the authors of the research mentioned above when they find that the results “underline the importance of targeting general demand in the sex industry in order to reduce exploitation and trafficking”⁸. The sex industry provides the destination for those trafficked for sexual exploitation, the ‘marketplace’ for those profiting from this crime. **It is the continued and increasing demand for sexual access to women’s bodies** - which we have seen does not

⁵ ibid

⁶ The Immigrant Council of Ireland et al., [Stop Traffic! Tackling Demand for Sexual Services of Trafficked Women and Girls](#) (Dublin, Ireland: ICI, 2014).

⁷ ibid

⁸ ibid



discriminate between victims of trafficking and the so-called 'voluntary' women in prostitution - **that fuels this trade.**

There is an ongoing court case against the US state of Nevada based on survivor testimonies that demonstrate how a legalised system of prostitution acts as an incentive for traffickers, as it gives them "legal access to have women be sold for sex while they profit, without the legal risk of getting caught"⁹. Nevada's legalised prostitution leads to an increased demand for 'commercial sex' in the state, and we can observe the clear correlation between this increased demand and trafficking for sexual exploitation. Survivor activist Rebecca Charleston said "where there is an avenue to make money by selling sex, corruption will follow. Our voices have been kept silent too long. Those [who] keep prostitution legal are promoting and contributing to the problem of human trafficking."¹⁰

Iroko's years of experience in Italy, a country at the centre of the trafficking crisis in Europe, further confirm that the **distinction between prostitution and trafficking for sexual exploitation is false** and in fact detrimental to policy intended to reduce it and protect those affected. It is imperative that European states work together to combat this phenomenon - as it is not limited to any one country or region - by targeting demand, as stipulated by the UN Palermo Protocol¹¹ in 2000 and the European Parliament in 2014. In this vein, we support the **Equality Model**, which has been in place in Sweden since 1999, where buyers are criminalised and prostituted persons are offered exit programmes. Despite the difficulty of gathering accurate data on this criminal activity, the figures show that roughly 43% of trafficking victims in Sweden in 2018 had been trafficked for sexual exploitation¹². We can compare this with Germany, where prostitution is legal and we find that sexual exploitation is the overwhelming form of trafficking; in 2017 it accounted for over 95% of all investigated cases¹³. The Equality Model is in line with the European Parliament resolution of 26 February 2014 on Prostitution, Sexual Exploitation and their impact on Gender Equality, commonly known as the **Honeyball Resolution**, which states "that there are several links between prostitution and trafficking, and recognises that **prostitution – both globally and across Europe – feeds the trafficking** of vulnerable women and under-age females"¹⁴. Moreover, Article 9.5 of the **Palermo Protocol** underlines that parties "shall adopt or strengthen legislative or other measures, such as education, social or cultural measures, including through bilateral and multilateral cooperation, to **discourage the demand that fosters all forms of exploitation** of persons, especially women and children, that leads to trafficking." Furthermore, in 2011 the Member States of the European Union agreed that they must adopt gender and gender equality perspectives in all actions to prevent and **discourage the demand**.¹⁵

⁹[Human trafficking thrives in legal brothels | Charleston](#)

¹⁰ ibid

¹¹ [Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime](#)

¹² 93 of 214 cases, as reported in [Sweden - United States Department of State](#) Trafficking in Persons Report 2019

¹³ 327 of 338 cases, as reported in [Germany - United States Department of State](#) Trafficking in Persons Report 2019

¹⁴[REPORT on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality - A7-0071/2014](#)

¹⁵ European Commission, [Directive 2011/36/EU](#) of the European Parliament and of the Council of 5 April 2011 on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA, preamble (25), articles 16 (4) and 18.



Key European and international institutions have already recognised that to fight trafficking for sexual exploitation states must target the demand for 'commercial sex'. Buyers do not care whether a prostituted woman is a victim of trafficking or not. They do not discriminate and neither should we.

"Trafficking is the means through which traffickers, pimps and other exploiters bring victims to meet the demand in the sex trade"¹⁶

Mickey Meji, survivor activist, *Embrace Dignity*

The survivor activist and founder of SPACE International, **Rachel Moran**, reminds us of a key element of the Equality Model. Like IROKO, Moran supports criminalising the demand-side of prostitution, the - predominantly - men who buy sexual access to women's bodies. But she rightly points out that that alone is not enough:

"If there were any kind of system that criminalised demand and did that and that alone, and walked away; I could not be on board with that. Because I don't believe that you can reasonably legislate to take a woman's income away without also giving her viable choices. For me, the critical thing about the [Equality] Model is that it implements the criminalisation of the demand for paid sex, while at the same time offering exit strategies and offering women the choice. That's why we support it."¹⁷

In the final analysis, one thing is clear:

"The legitimisation of prostitution, and its promotion as an employment option, has been a direct cause of the international trafficking of women and children for prostitution. In a global patriarchal society, which legitimates male use of female bodies as disposable commodities, to express outrage and call for an end to trafficking of young women and children is contradictory and incoherent unless we first put a stop to the commercialisation of women's bodies in prostitution."¹⁸

Esohe Aghatise, Founder of Associazione Iroko

¹⁶ [MICKEY MEJI 18TH APRIL 2018 STOCKHOLM SWEDEN](#)

¹⁷ CATW - CSW 2013 Panel of Survivors of Sex Trafficking and Prostitution <https://youtu.be/RLqz2jC0QgE>

¹⁸ [Trafficking for Prostitution in Italy: Possible Effects of Government Proposals for Legalization of Brothels](#)

