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Statement submitted by Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, a non-governmental organization in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council*

The Secretary-General has received the following statement, which is being circulated in accordance with paragraphs 36 and 37 of Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

* The present statement is issued without formal editing.



Statement

We, Sisters of Mercy, welcome the opportunity to address the 60th session of the Commission on the Status of Women and wish to express our insights on the priority theme of women's empowerment and sustainable development. We are encouraged that the 2030 Agenda makes an explicit commitment to "leave no one behind" and makes a clear priority the "realization of the human rights of all" (A/70/L.1). In particular, we are heartened that gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls are clearly named in Sustainable Development Goal 5. At the same time we hold strong reservations about the interpretation and realization of such a goal. In order for genuine sustainable development to take place, women and girls must be consulted and included in implementation at all levels.

Specifically, we want to make recommendations and observations based on our global experience working with people on the ground, particularly in relation to human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

We also wish to draw attention to both the possibilities and pitfalls of Target 5.1 that states, "Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls in the public and private spheres, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation". Our concern lies with the interpretation and measurement of such a target, particularly in relation to the issue of trafficking for sexual exploitation. If we do not prioritize knowledge gained from women's lived experience, we will miss vital information about the nature and human impact of trafficking.

We believe that in order to truly comprehend the issue of trafficking we must listen deeply to the experiences of those who have been trafficked. True empowerment means giving voice to those who have been marginalized. These women are the experts and can provide us with key insights into the trafficking experience. Listening to women's voices and responding to their needs and concerns is a key principle for sustainable development.

The voices of women trafficked for sexual exploitation have been chiefly absent from human trafficking discourses and policy discussions, including agendas for international development. This is because the paradigms for understanding sex trafficking have largely been theorized within the criminalization, international migration and economic realms. This, coupled with the fact that women trafficked for sex are a "hidden population" and, therefore, difficult to access, has meant that those most closely affected by this phenomenon have been at worst excluded from the discussion, or at least kept silent.

Representations of women trafficked for sex all-too-often present stereotypes. Their experiences are sensationalized, leaving the impression that at the core of trafficked women's experience are isolated acts of victimization. These stereotypes may likely impact implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 5. Life course trajectories leading to sex trafficking suggest that rather more complex dynamics are actually the case; simple conclusions that universalize or essentialize the sex trafficking experience continue the misrepresentation of those affected by the phenomenon. Sustainable development depends on authentic representations of the trafficking experience in order to introduce viable solutions for implementation. Former United Nations Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children Ms Joy Ngozi Ezeilo stated the importance of listening to first-hand accounts of the trafficking experience. Calling for a human rights based

approach to trafficking, in her report to the 57th Commission on the Status of Women 2013, she claimed “the participation of victims of trafficking is critical in formulating prevention strategies and initiatives [...]”.

Whilst recognizing that demand is the inherent cause of sex trafficking, women and girls can provide unique insights into significant events across the life span, providing understandings into their vulnerability to being sexually exploited. Listening to trafficked women’s narratives from a Life Course Perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of the sex trafficking trajectory. It entails an exploration of women’s personal circumstances in childhood, through adolescence and into adulthood. These personal insights, combined with an analysis of factors that exist in the external environment, including socio-economic, environmental and political contexts provide key understandings in relation to women and girls being made vulnerable to trafficking for sexual exploitation.

At the grassroots level, young formerly trafficked women from the South East Asian region have shared their experiences with us from a Life Course Perspective. They have highlighted their vulnerability to being sexually exploited; illustrating that sex trafficking is a complex phenomenon that cannot be presented effectively in simple terms.

The women’s stories forcibly declare that the market for cheap sex is an exploitative one, preying on women made vulnerable through oppressive economic and social systems. Largely constructed out of male privilege and dominance it exploits young and disadvantaged women and reaps large profits for those who invest in the sex industry. It is clear that these women were born into, and lived in poverty and were unwitting victims of globalization. Most of them also experienced family violence and sexual abuse, and some of them from a very early age. Many had migrated in order to flee their impoverishment and oppression and to seek out new alternatives for their futures. Some were victims of petty criminals, themselves caught on the bottom rungs of national and global crime networks. They all were born into cultures that have traditionally oppressed women, imposing on them double standards of morality, using them for pleasure while condemning them for failing to match the idealized, perfect-wife/mother/Madonna archetype.

Women described the trafficking experience as isolating, degrading, controlling and as encroaching upon their personal freedom. This resulted in feelings of fear, shame, despair, shock, sadness and self-blame. At the same time, as their stories unfolded, they described forces at work that were “bigger” than their individual experiences and feelings.

At every level of their existence, women and girls’ human rights were denied. In an attempt to claim and realize their rights to live free from oppression and violence, women found ways to continue, despite their feelings of subjugation. Many maintained a sense of hope that someday they would be freed from brutal exploitation. They upheld their dignity through a belief in their own self-worth and a strong desire to live a life free from violence and commodification. In very restrictive and violent environments they exhibited extraordinary human resilience and hope that enabled them to survive their ordeals. The following words, spoken by a formerly trafficked woman give credence to the fact that real stories need to be told from those who know them best.

I want that my experience before would not just only be an experience. I would like to use my experience as a testimony, so that other people will be helped, because out of the experience that I had ... I am in the best position to share my experiences with others and I want my experience to be a positive factor for other people, to inspire their lives also. [Annabel]

Human agency is integral to addressing human trafficking within a sustainable development framework. In drawing upon their agency, the voices of formerly trafficked women must be central to policy discussions on human trafficking and sustainable development. If not, there is a great risk that the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 5, will be largely irrelevant to the genuine needs of women and girls and fail to effectively combat human trafficking.

Recommendations

In order for women to be genuinely empowered and for rights-based sustainable development to be realized we call on Member States to:

- Analyse and understand women's experiences of trafficking for sexual exploitation from a Life Course Perspective.
- Consult women themselves to understand their needs and concerns: spaces should be made available for women's stories to be disseminated amongst the wider community so that a more nuanced understanding of the issue can be more widely known, to avoid further generalization-making or essentializing of the sex trafficking experience.
- Adopt policies that reflect the interests of those most affected by sex trafficking. It is, therefore, imperative that policy makers understand both the individual and structural factors that contribute to the sex trafficking phenomenon in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, particularly Sustainable Development Goal 5. This means that global, national and local legislation and action plans for implementation of sustainable development must reflect the experiences of women trafficked for sex.
- Articulate a vision that recognizes the human rights of all women and adopt a rights based approach to addressing human trafficking. This means focusing first on women's needs and concerns, recognizing them as agents and empowering women by addressing barriers to the realization of their rights.