Sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality

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The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality adopted the own-initiative report by Mary HONEYBALL (S&D, UK) on sexual exploitation and prostitution and its impact on gender equality.

Prostitution and forced prostitution are intrinsically linked to gender inequality in society and have an impact on the status of women and men in society and the perception of their mutual relations and sexuality.

EU data show that the current policy to combat trafficking is not effective and that there is a problem to identify and prosecute traffickers so that the investigation of sex-trafficking cases and the prosecution and conviction of human traffickers need to be strengthened.

The report recognised that prostitution and sexual exploitation are highly gendered issues and violations of human dignity. It stated 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, a large percentage of whom are between 13-25 years old. According to data, a majority of victims (62 %) are trafficked for sexual exploitation, with women and under-age females accounting for 96 % of identified and presumed victims, with the percentage of victims from non-EU countries showing an increase in the past few years. The lack of reliable, accurate and comparable data among countries, owing mainly to the illegal and often invisible nature of prostitution and trafficking, keeps the prostitution market opaque and hinders political decision-making.

In this context, Member States are called upon to:

- introduce, in accordance with national law, regular, **confidential counselling and health checks** for prostitutes, on premises other than those where prostitution takes place;
- exchange **best practices** on ways to reduce the dangers associated with street prostitution;
- **combat child prostitution** (involving persons under the age of 18) as energetically as possible, as it is the most serious form of forced prostitution;
- conduct special, age-specific educational **awareness-raising** and preventive campaigns in schools and colleges;
- repeal repressive legislation against prostituted persons;
- give the police and the authorities responsible for premises where prostitution takes place the right to enter such premises and to carry out checks at random;
- transpose Directive 2011/36/EU on preventing and combating trafficking in human beings and protecting its victims, and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/629/JHA, into national law as rapidly as possible, particularly with a view to protecting victims;
- encourage police authorities to cooperate with the victims and encourage them to testify, to encourage the existence of specialised services within the police and to employ police women and improve judicial cooperation between Member States in this field;
- tackle the **underlying social problems** that force men, women and children into prostitution (such as poverty, social exclusion);
- evaluate both the positive and negative effects of criminalising the purchase of sexual services on reducing prostitution and trafficking.
- take measures to discourage the practice of sexual tourism inside as well as outside the EU.

Nordic model: the report considered that the most effective way of combating the trafficking of women and under-age females for sexual exploitation and improving gender equality is the model implemented in Sweden, Iceland and Norway (the so-called Nordic model). This model is currently under consideration in several European countries, where the purchase of sexual services constitutes the criminal act, not the services of the prostituted persons.

Stressing that as prostitution is a cross-border problem, Member States should assume responsibility for combating the buying of sex outside their own territory by introducing measures similar to those adopted in Norway, where a citizen can be prosecuted for purchasing sex abroad. Members stated that looking upon prostitution as legal 'sex work', decriminalising the sex industry in general and making procuring legal is **not a solution** to keeping vulnerable women and under-age females safe from violence and exploitation, but has the opposite effect and puts them in danger of a higher level of violence.

Lastly, the report urged the Commission to **evaluate the impact that the European legal framework** designed to eliminate trafficking for sexual exploitation has had to date, to undertake further research on patterns of prostitution, on human trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation and on the increased level of sex tourism in the EU, with particular reference to minors, and to promote the exchange of best practices among the Member States. The Commission should funding projects and programmes to fight trafficking in human beings and sexual exploitation. The EEAS should also take measures to stop the practice of prostitution in areas of conflict where EU military forces are present.