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Torino, Italy
Benin City, Nigeria
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The UN Special Rapporteur on
Violence Against Women and Girls

Dear Ms. Reem Alsalem,

We welcome the opportunity to demonstrate the nexus between prostitution and violence against women and girls.

IROKO is an international charity and human rights organisation providing direct services to women and girls, survivors of the sex trade in Italy and Nigeria since 1998. Combatting the commercial sexual exploitation of women and girls through advocacy, direct service provision and training are our main areas of work. We provide valuable input to requests such as this, drawing from our daily experiences with the women and girls that we support, who are directly impacted by the issues in question.¹

IROKO made this submission in collaboration with other organisations named in the email body. The other organisations that contributed to this Submission also provide services at various levels to survivors of prostitution and sex trafficking.

From the women's experiences and stories they told us, we learned that **prostitution is one of the most egregious forms of violence against women and girls** that is unfortunately still socially accepted in many countries and societies.

The **overwhelming majority of those who end up in the sex trade suffer from multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination and structural inequalities**, such as their ethnicity, sex, sexual orientation, social standing or lack thereof, lack of educational, economic, cultural and social opportunities, harmful social and cultural stereotyping.

The story of Gioia² is a prime example of that:

"My family is very poor. My mother is a farmer in the village and is the only one who earns money for the family. What she earns is not enough to feed and pay our bills. We are 9 altogether, 7 children (4 girls, 3 boys) and my parents. My father got injured in his job as a labourer in the city and did not receive any compensation. I was pulled out of school so that my brother can continue to go to school. It was very difficult. We could only afford one meal a day. If a neighbour or relation offered us a meal or snack, we were happy. My friend introduced me

¹ This submission also provides an essential window for survivors to testify to the violence of prostitution. By so doing, we ensure that their voices are heard at all levels and they thus indirectly participate in any decision that is taken, which may impact them in any manner.

² Not her real name. Names have been changed throughout this document to protect the identity of the women.

to a "sugar daddy."³ He offered me money to "sleep"⁴ with him. I refused. One day, my mother fell in the farm and was hospitalised. We had no money to pay her medical bills. The sugar daddy offered me money again. I could no longer refuse. From then on, it has been hell. His wife comes to insult and beat me up regularly. My neighbours told her about me and laugh at me, but what can I do? I need money to survive and that is the only possibility I had to make money. My sugar daddy beats me up if I don't respond quickly to what he wants. I cannot tell you what he does to me sometimes. It is just too terrible. He watches those online pornography films and then tells me to do the things there with him. If I refuse, he beats me. He calls me terrible names. If he quarrels with his wife at home, he takes it out on me and say we are all the same. What he cannot do to his wife, he does to me. There is no one to help you. I also sleep with other men passing through our area. At night, I stand on the side of the road to get clients. I know other girls like me who also became "ashawo"⁵ because that is the only way they can survive. I make enough money now to buy food and pay bills but I always feel dirty. The money is still not enough as area boys⁶ sometimes beat me up and take all my money. If I allow them to sleep with me in group⁷, sometimes they won't take my money. It is a continuous fight to survive. Some are lucky and find a sponsor to take them to Europe. I don't know anyone who can help me to go. But I hear that it is not so good for them either in Europe, that they suffer a lot. I could not take it anymore and I was told to come to your organisation, that you help people like me without judging us. That is why I came here".

The **so-called "sugar daddy" syndrome is one of the hidden forms of prostitution in Nigeria**. Unfortunately, it is a well-known fact that many of the sugar daddies occupy high positions in government.

In the West, the situation is not much different. Young women and girls, desperate for money to fund their education, are encouraged to find rich sugar daddies and there are online websites where meetings are arranged. The educational financial assistance provided in some countries is not enough to cover their needs⁸, hence the resort to finding other avenues to fund their education.

Profiling of women and girls affected by prostitution in Nigeria is challenging and complex, comprised of different strata and situations. The majority of those who resort to prostitution suffer from multiple forms of structural inequalities, discrimination and exclusion, as well as lack of appropriate family support. They are often indigent, poorly educated, superstitious, not knowledgeable about the world outside of their societies, naïve and easily deceived. Fearful of authority and easily manipulated with pseudo religious/ traditional rites¹, they are often without support and once in the sex trade, find it extremely difficult to exit, notwithstanding the daily physical, psychological, economic and emotional violence that they are subjected to. They often rely on information from other women within their circles, who are no better informed than they are. This sort of interdependence, though it provides them with

³ Usually much older man who solicits sex from much younger women and girls in exchange for money and material things.

⁴ Euphemism often used by prostituted women in Nigeria to describe the daily rape they are subjected to by their buyers.

⁵ Derogatory name used for women and girls in prostitution in Nigeria.

⁶ Area violent gangs made up of local boys.

⁷ Gang rape

⁸ <https://juliebindel.substack.com/p/the-bitter-taste-of-sugar-babe-sites>

some level of support, also serves to shut them deeper into the violent conditions that they live in and perpetuates their insecurity.

In describing the sense of despair and helplessness that she felt in having her body invaded daily, one of the survivors told us:

"Do you know how horrible and disgusting it is to open the most intimate part of you to men and boys who disgust you and even when you are not well and your body hurts all over because of how many of them have already done all sorts of terrible things to you? Do you know how humiliating it is that you cannot look others in the eyes because you are afraid that they may understand what you are doing and laugh at you? Do you know how hard it is to even breath when these men do certain things to you? All this because you need the money. How can anybody call rape a job? Is it a job because they gave you money? It is not! How can such violence be called a job? How can that humiliation be called a job? I do it because I have no choice. It seems to be the quickest way for me to make money to survive. I would like to stop immediately, but how will I eat? How will I support my children and pay my bills?"

The buyers, who are almost exclusively male, are from all walks of life. Professionals, members of the National Assembly, business executives, university lecturers, students, religious men and so called "leaders of society". The casual brutality of their actions coupled with the stigma directed at the prostituted women and girls is shocking and unfathomable and is reinforced by the impunity they enjoy, while prostituted women have the burden of responsibility for their actions is always laid on the women and girls, who are branded as not "having the appropriate moral upbringing". **We know that the power disparity between buyers and sellers is not one of morality, but of structural social, economic and political inequalities, stereotyping and discrimination.**

Prostitution in Nigeria is illegal in all Northern States under the Islamic Penal Code. In Southern Nigeria, the activities of pimps or madams, underage prostitution and the operation or ownership of brothels are penalized under sections 223, 224, and 225 of the Nigerian Criminal Code.⁹

Prostituted women and girls are often subjected to the most horrendous form of physical, psychological, sexual, economic, emotional and other forms of violence. **Some of the violence they are subjected to would qualify to be described as torture under the relevant UN Conventions** and also under national laws and regional conventions and resolutions. Testimony from prostituted women shows that no amount of "harm reduction" can remove the violence of prostitution.¹⁰

In the words of Mary, one of the women we support, *"when they stop to pick you up, they seem nice and friendly. As soon as you are naked before them, they become devils, demanding things that they know will hurt you very badly. There is no way of telling what they will do to you before*

⁹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prostitution_in_Nigeria#:~:text=Prostitution%20in%20Nigeria%20is%20illegal,of%20the%20Nigerian%20Criminal%20Code.

¹⁰ Canadian survivor Trisha Baptie: "I had five minutes, I had two minutes, I had ten minutes... it didn't matter. It's the luck of the draw. There was no real way for us to know who was going to be a good date and who was going to be a bad date." <http://thetvcc.ca/News/2012/04/11/Nordic-Prostitution-Laws/index1.html>

they start. You cannot force them to stop because they are stronger than you and will hurt you more if you fight and try to stop them”.

Prostitution, pornography, sex trafficking and various other forms of sexual exploitation are closely interlinked and the testimony of survivors attest to this fact. Analysis of the trafficking of persons, shows that it responds to the market forces of demand and supply. Prostitution and pornography exist because there is a demand for them.¹¹ Pornography is filmed prostitution and both are highly profitable, with little or no overhead costs and extremely low risks for the profiteers.¹² The demand is high, profitability coupled with minimum risks drives such demand, which expands and requests new avenues to fill and satisfy its expansion because old avenues of direct access to local women¹³ are no longer adequate or available to satisfy the demand. This too is an economic reality. ***When the economic and social conditions of women in any given country improve, prostitution ceases to be an option for the women in that country.*** Those who gain directly from this industry -pimps, traffickers, sex industry ‘magnates’¹⁴, ensure that the demand is met through new avenues created to meet and satisfy its expansion: trafficking of women, girls and children from poor countries. The demand for prostituted sex creates a strong profit incentive for traffickers to entrap more victims, thus fuelling the growth of trafficking in persons for the benefit of prostitutes, buyers and users.¹⁵

Supporters of the sex industry usually assert that prostituted women consent and ‘voluntarily’ choose prostitution, without coercion and thus, that they are ‘sex workers’ who chose to come to Europe to earn more money. They claim that the “bad conditions”¹⁶ they find themselves in are due to poor negotiation for good ‘working’ conditions, just like any other ‘worker’. ***It is however pointless to speak of consent when we know that coercive circumstances are what makes women go into prostitution.***¹⁷ Repeated and various examples of women in prostitution and of trafficked women has shown that this is a fallacy.

“Mary”¹⁸, in her twenties, was trafficked to Italy three years earlier. Due to poverty following the death of her mother when she was 16, she entered prostitution in Nigeria in order to feed and send her siblings to school. At 15, she was sexually abused by her uncle. Her boyfriend encouraged her to sell her body as the only option to ensure that her siblings did not end up in the street. She did. A few years later, this same friend assured her she would earn more money

¹¹ That is an economic reality.

¹² Idem

¹³ Some countries, like the Netherlands, where prostitution has been legalised have openly admitted to the need to import foreign women from poor countries to fill the gap left by their own women who are no longer willing and can afford not to go into prostitution. – See Raymond, J. 10 Reasons for Not Legalizing Prostitution, <https://catwinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Ten-Reasons-for-NOT-Legalizing-Prostitution.pdf>

¹⁴ Prostitutors they should be called

¹⁵ ECE/AC.28/2004/10 Page 9 (HWWA, 2004 – CATW handbook on Prostitution and Trafficking). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that in Italy alone between 10,000 and 15,000 Nigerian women were trafficked into the commercial sex industry in 2001. By 2010, between 20,000 to 40,000 thousand Nigerian women and girls were estimated to have been trafficked to the West African country of Mali alone, where they are sexually exploited in the flourishing brothels there, on their way to being trafficked subsequently to Europe where earnings for traffickers are higher. This estimate does not take into account the many thousands that had been trafficked to other West African countries, the Middle East and directly to Europe.

¹⁶ “Bad conditions” here include all forms of violence, discrimination and stigma that the women suffer both at the hands of buyers and from society in general.

¹⁷ There is no consent where circumstances induce women to go into such violent conditions.

¹⁸ Not her real name. Mary is one of the women assisted by Iroko

*in Europe than she was earning in Nigeria. She told her that the demand for Nigerian women was quite high in Europe and that there were many more men willing to pay her well for sex.*¹⁹ Those were the “choices” that Mary had, which shows that women and girls go into prostitution as a survival mechanism²⁰ and not because they chose it as a “liberating, act of sexual autonomy”. Mary’s story is quite similar to several other stories of women in different parts of the world who are induced into prostitution²¹. ***The market does not make any distinction.***

Recommendations to prevent and end violence associated with the prostitution for women and girls?

- Address the demand for sexual services as provided for by international legal instruments, convention and resolutions. Declare prostitution violence against women and demand that Member States pass laws to recognise this fact.²²
- Pass a resolution obliging Member States to dedicate an adequate percentage of their total annual budget to prevent and end violence against women and girls, through socio cultural planning and education.

As long as prostitution is tolerated, and governments permit it to be practiced as a employment, trafficking in and violence against women will continue.

Signatures (see email list)

¹⁹ Mary needed to find a home for her siblings and this offer was the opportunity that Mary had to protect her siblings. Her younger sister was in danger of suffering the same fate as she had in the hands of her uncle. Mary could never have imagined what was in store for her in Europe. She was raped and beaten continuously and prostituted by the men who trafficked her across the Sahara into Southern Europe in the different countries where she was taken by her traffickers. By the time she arrived in Italy, she was broken, without money and had had no news of her siblings for several months. She was desperate, without legal documents and had been told that any attempt to reveal who had brought her to Europe would result in severe consequences for her siblings. When she arrived in Italy, she discovered that the man who brought her had sold her to a woman, her ‘madam’ to whom she was to pay the sum of 50,000 euros. She became a sex slave to the woman, who exploited her ruthlessly. She was required to make advance payment of 1,000 euros as rent for the piece of sidewalk on the road where she was prostituted. Her ‘madam’ gave her a loan for the first down payment at an interest rate of 300 percent. She was required to buy special clothing at exorbitant prices from her ‘madam’s friend. She was required to pay 500 euros monthly for the bed she shared with another young woman. She was required to pay a weekly sum of 200 euros as contribution for food in the house, but she hardly had enough food to eat and was almost always hungry. She was required to bring a minimum of 350 euros daily to her madam as part payment of her debt of 50,000 euros. She was not allowed to keep any part of the money she earned for herself. She was required to make a full account on how much she had earned that day by giving a full account of the remaining condoms which she was giving each day before she went out to be prostituted. Each condom used must account for at least 10 euros, which was the minimum going price for Nigerian girls on the road. In this way, her ‘madam’ was able make a rough estimate of how much she may have earned that day. By the first year of being exploited, Mary had earned over 45,000 euros for her ‘madam’, but was told she still owed 40,000 euros. She had kept a record of her earnings and when she disputed the amount she still owed, she was severely beaten and told that she had to pay an additional 5,000 euros for her stubbornness. The woman then told Mary not to worry, that when she (Mary) finished paying her debt, she too could buy another woman to be her slave. Mary refused and found the courage to run away. She had been in prostitution for almost two years and notwithstanding the huge amounts she had earned, she had no money and no home to go to. For Mary, prostitution was a necessary evil which she had had to do in order to survive and to take care of her siblings. She often had repeated strong pains in her stomach and despite doing all sorts of medical tests, there was never any sort of physical illness discovered. She hated being referred to as a prostitute and called it the activity of another person different from her. She called that person Mary. Her real name was different and that other person did not do the prostitution activities which Mary did. For her they were two quite separate entities. We learned to respect this dichotomy as it was evident that this kept her mentally stable.

²⁰ It is important to underline the fact that survival is not only from poverty but also from dysfunctional families, lack of family support and of cultural values as well as absence of educational opportunities.

²¹ The story of Manju, related in Time Magazine of Monday, Jun. 21, 1993 entitled ‘Prostitution: The Skin Trade’ also illustrates this.

²² The main UN international legal instruments like the 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others (1949 Convention), the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime (The Palermo Protocol), and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is that they make the use of commonly agreed words like “prostitution,” “exploiting the prostitution of another person,” “the exploitation of the prostitution of others,” and the “exploitation of prostitution of women” etc., and do not use terminologies like “sex work”, etc.