

Transcript of Speech by Panelist Gregoire Thiery, Founder of Coalition Against Prostitution International

Thank you very much, Youla, thank you to the organizers of the conference. Thank you also very much, Maximilian, for presenting this very important report. And I would like to start by saying that we fully support both the analysis and the recommendations of the report and that we will be happy to help disseminate it and to support the conclusions of it.

I am indeed the founder and the former director of CAP international, I will simply update the figures about our coalition, we are currently a coalition of 35 NGOs now, we are represented in 28 countries and reaching out to more than 16.000 victims of trafficking and prostitution, so the coalition has kept growing and it's a positive development.

I will share with you our analysis of the impact of the COVID crisis on the victims we provide support to in those 28 countries.

Well, first of all, I think it is very important to remind that this health but also economic and social COVID-19 crisis has and is still disproportionately affecting the most vulnerable groups in our societies. That was highlighted in the report, of course. And as a result, women and girls belong to the most discriminated communities. Migrant women, refugees, displaced people, indigenous people, ethnic and religious minorities, women belonging to the lowest caste from rural communities, but also, in general, the poorest women and girls, the youngest women and girls, the homeless, the victims of prior sexual violence are both the primary victims of economic and sexual exploitation, and the primary victims of the current crisis. The overwhelming majority of victims of trafficking and prostitution indeed belong to these groups. The indigenous are over-represented in prostitution in Canada, Dalit women in India, migrant and refugee women in Europe, members of ethnic and religious minorities all over the world, all those groups are disproportionately affected by sexual exploitation, trafficking, prostitution and the crisis.

It is important as well to remind that before the COVID-19 crisis, these women and children, often without residential status, with low or no access to housing, to decent incomes, or very often without access to minimal social rights, were surviving in prostitution or were surviving in situations of sexual exploitation. They did not live or fit, they survived those situations.

And as several investigative police forces in the world have shown, the income of people exploited in prostitution or in trafficking for sexual exploitation is almost or entirely confiscated by traffickers, by pimps, by smugglers, by landlords and by many others predators. In very concrete terms, over the past 16 months now, we have seen how many of these women and girls do not even have enough economic resources to simply survive. It is not a question of living, it is a question of surviving. And this is why our grassroots organisations are on the frontline to really offer the minimum necessities of life to as many people as possible, which are basically:

Access to free information – and thank you for highlighting this, Maximilian, as well: The simple access to the information about the situation we are living in, about this crisis, what it means etc. is already a huge challenge;

Access to food and

Access to shelters.

This is really to show how basic the needs are.

In this emergency situation, our members have really ... simply meet those very basic needs, access to food, housing and health.

Thank you as well, Maximilian, for highlighting the extreme challenges for frontline NGOs. The members of CAP have faced in their daily efforts extreme difficulties and challenges to simply reach out to the victims, reaching them, supporting them, running shelters, running the drop-incenters. All of these central elements of support that we can bring to these 16.000 victims of trafficking and prostitution have been challenged.

In terms of advocacy, we have discerned two levels of intervention, which is short-term and mid-term. In the short-term, country by country, we have called on States - with limited success, to be honest - to offer what we call universal access to what we have called three basic rights and dignity-guarantees, which are housing, minimal resources and legal residential status.

In the mid-term and long-term, of course, we are calling on States to maximize their exit options and alternate it for victims of trafficking and prostitution and we are also consolidating? our advocacy efforts on this notion and ambition to "leaving no one below the poverty line".

I would also like to quickly highlight an additional challenge that we have faced, which is a very dangerous trend, is that some groups, including criminal groups, have again instrumentalized this crisis to call on states to "legalize sex work and provide replacement or substitution incomes for sex workers" impacted by this crisis. In doing so, these people pretend to ignore or deliberately omit the fact that the vast majority of those victims had actually no incomes before the crisis. In my country, France, I can give you a few figures, the 2013 intelligence report of the ministry of home affairs indicates that on a rate, 85% of the incomes of foreign victims of prostitution and trafficking are simply confiscated and stolen by the pimps, the traffickers, and the smugglers. And thus, not only do these people have no legal income base to present to establish a potential replacement income, but also they had no income of their own before the health crisis.

And when it comes to French nationals, the vast majority of them are registered under what is known as the French public solidarity income and thus they will never take the risk of establishing a pre-crisis income to benefit from a replacement income. So those notions are extremely non-pragmatic and dangerous.

I would like to highlight as well that this ideological offensive does not even make sense in countries which have actually legalized the exploitation of prostitution as "sex work", countries that have decriminalized the demand for sex and the exploitation of prostitution... why? Because if we take the example of Germany, 16 years after the implementation of the ProstG in 2002 and 16 years after the creation of the specific social status as sex worker, only 76 individuals, 76 prostituted persons, out of the total of 200 thousands or potentially even 400 thousands were registered for this specific "professional status" that was supposed to make use of their social rights. Why? The German government for the first time in 2018 has brought a beginning of a response to that. First, because prostituted persons and victims of trafficking do not want an official status of "sex workers." Which they themselves consider stigmatizing and dangerous, and even less so as employees because they don't see themselves as employees of their pimps. Second element is that the exploited foreign women have simply no further access to these rights once their exploiters are recognized as legitimate employers. It's not because you legalize the exploitation of prostitution and you legalize brothel owners and pimps that suddenly the foreign victims of trafficking will suddenly access rights as so-called sex workers. And finally, all of them fear, those persons above all, and rightly so actually, that once the specific status is established, it will be imposed on them. And that is what can currently happen in countries like Germany and the Netherlands which have failed in the implementation of their "sex work policy" and that

then can intend to impulse the registration on those victims and those victims don't want to be impulsed, don't want to have this status impulse. So I would like to conclude by saying that we have to be very pragmatic and efficient in this crisis and also after this crisis. The right approach to this terrible situation is to grant universal access to basic rights and dignity instead of developing a non-activable ideological legal framework which have actually benefitted the pimps, the traffickers and the buyers, not the victims of the prostitution and trafficking before and during the crisis. So we call on States [...?] to promote access to universal rights which are access to information, access to decent jobs, access to legal residence status, access to health and housing. Thank you very much!

(Unverified transcript by Caroline Sander (GGMH). Do not quote.)