

Mediterranean Institute of Gender Studies
Stop Traffic Conference / Report Launch
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Trafficking in women for sexual exploitation in Cyprus is a problem of big dimensions, long history and little success in terms of its eradication. Cyprus is also the only EU member state that was ruled against by the ECHR, based on the violation of Anti-Slavery Convention (2010 trafficking case of Oxana Rancheva), and is placed by the US state department in the tier 2 along with several other EU member states. Cyprus is known to be both destination and transition country for trafficking, and, as in the rest of Europe, the majority of identified victims in Cyprus are females, who are the victims of sexual exploitation.

It can be said that trafficking in women in Cyprus is a known and visible problem. It received a considerable amount of media attention as well as political effort, however, without much effects to this effort. What remains invisible and is unrecognized, is the link between trafficking and prostitution, and largely because of the lack of this recognition, the role the demand plays in sexual exploitation of women remains also unrecognized. Additionally, the very concept of prostitution remains a very sensitive, very poorly understood and largely mythologized area, that only recently opened up to somewhat limited public discussion.

With regards to specific measures on demand for sex trafficking - no such measures up to date exist in legislation. The 2007 *Law on Combatting trafficking* does not go beyond criminalizing traffickers and provides no specific measures on buyers of services from trafficked persons. The 2011 EC Directive on Trafficking has not yet been transposed in Cyprus since deadline of transposition passed in April 2013. The delay in transposition shows signs of lack of political will, leading us to draw the conclusion that trafficking in women and sexual exploitation is not specifically high on the agenda of the Cyprus' government.

The law transposing the directive is being debated in the parliament right at this moment.

It is important to note that the new law on trafficking that will finally transpose the EC Directive, introduces the measures on demand reduction. Specifically, it criminalizes the client who *knowingly* purchases services of a victim of trafficking. It remains to be seen how successful such approach to trafficking will be, however, in our opinion, this measure is unsatisfactory, and we, as MIGS, will be actively seeking to change the clause on criminalizing the buyer: in cases of trafficking for sexual exploitation, from knowing or intentional purchase to a reformulated clause "regardless the knowledge of the client".

We believe that for the law to effectively address the demand (that is one of the root causes of sexual exploitation), it needs to discriminate between different forms of trafficking, placing sexual exploitation into specific category, where the buyer should be criminalized regardless the knowledge of victim's circumstances.

We base our opinion on the extensive research and the documented evidence that comes from within Cyprus and outside of it. Criminalizing the 'knowing' buyer has proved ineffective in such countries as Finland, that was recently confirmed in the report commissioned by the Ministry of Justice in Finland. At the same time, there is evidence that wider laws on prostitution, that go beyond narrow focus on trafficking only, and criminalize all buyers of sex, implemented in such countries as Sweden, had positive impact on the reduction of trafficking and sexual exploitation within prostitution. It has also been established through the comparative studies that the Swedish

model had normative effects with regards to gender norms and gender equality, that is intrinsically connected with the dynamic of trafficking for sexual exploitation in global scale.

Additionally, the recently conducted by our institute qualitative research that focused specifically on the attitudes of sex buyers in Cyprus, has confirmed, also in line with international research, that those who purchase sexual services, very rarely are willing to pay attention and discriminate between victims and the so-called 'voluntary' prostitutes, and even in those cases when clients are faced with visible signs (such as physical signs & psychological signs of abuse) very often this does not deter them from purchasing sex from such persons, and it does not deter them from further engaging with the system of sexual exploitation in which many women are caught. On the contrary, the research points out, that the absence of any legislative measures targeting buyers of sex, fosters unhealthy attitudes among buyers, that normalize and trivialize violence often experienced by women in prostitution. Therefore, it is only expected that such legal leeways as 'unintentional purchase of sexual service from a victim' will not help reducing the demand, but provide an excuse for engaging in the system that acts as a scene, where violence against women, economic exploitation, trafficking and other forms of gendered inequality take place. This scene is called prostitution.

Overall, in Cyprus, discussions as well as political actions around “demand” remain very problematic and are only in the embryonic stage: until very recently the very idea of talking about demand, recognizing demand as root cause of sexual exploitation and addressing demand at state level, was a hardly approachable subject. As in the rest of the European states, except for a small minority of Nordic countries and the recent precedent set by France (as well as the EU Parliament's recent resolution) the emphasis in addressing sexual exploitation, was always placed on the victim and, generally, on the woman, as a supplier, who finds herself in exploitative circumstances, rather than on the buyer, who is on most occasions male and who takes active part in producing and shaping those circumstances. Even in those cases when 'demand factor' is addressed, it is limited to intermediary forces, such as traffickers and pimps, never targeting the final consumers of sex.

While the issue of trafficking in women, mostly due to the NGO efforts received somewhat limited attention in media, unfortunately, often in sensationalist rather than substantial frames, the question of demand and its role in trafficking, always remained outside of public concern. In 2012, MIGS, as active member of Cyprus Women's Lobby, with the support of the European Parliament's Office in Cyprus initiated the first public discussion on the issue of prostitution, that also opened the door to debate the role of sex buyers in relation to trafficking and sexual exploitation. The debate was further continued in 2013 by the Ombudsman office, which produced a report on the state of prostitution in Cyprus.

This report clearly recognizes prostitution as form of gendered inequality, by which migrant women are affected disproportionately. The report calls for full decriminalization of prostituted persons, it recognizes demand as one of the driving forces behind sexual exploitation and supports the model that criminalizes purchase of sexual services. It also emphasizes that such a measure should be implemented as part of a package, together with exit programs, and modernized and comprehensive migration policies. The report also recommends to create an “Action plan on Prostitution”.

We would like to finish with a statement, that though in Cyprus the debate on prostitution is only opening up and is often being informed by unrealistic and largely mythical ideas as to what prostitution is and what the driving forces behind prostitution are, we are also now at the point when the evidence can no longer be denied. MIGS, as a research centre dedicated to gender equality, has long argued that trafficking, sexual exploitation and prostitution are intrinsically linked, and the demand factor cannot be overlooked in addressing the problem trafficking in women for sexual

exploitation. Participating in this project was an enlightening experience that provided the evidence: a large online survey, that had over 1000 respondents, revealed that over 40% bought sex, almost all sex buyers are men, and around half of those sex buyers are *regular* clients of women in prostitution. A large amount of those sex buyers regularly witness signs of exploitation, which, generally speaking, does not make them change their mind and does not prevent them from further buying sex. On the contrary, witnessing the signs of abuse and exploitation desensitizes the buyers, who, in order to maintain positive self-image, disregard or trivialize violence by adhering to “I’m doing nothing wrong in this business” arguments.

Based on this, we believe that any model that *does not* criminalizes the buyer, or that plays with the ideas of *intention* or *knowledge* of exploitation, will be unsuccessful in fighting sexual exploitation of women and girls.

We would like to thank our partners, and specifically the Immigrant Council of Ireland, for collaboration in this very fruitful and very important project, and for their commitment and dedication in the fight against exploitation, for the rights of women, for the rights of migrant women, and for a society based on equality and healthy positive sexuality in which, we are sure, we all would like to live.