**UNDP Statement at the CEDAW half-Day of General Discussion on trafficking of women and girls in the context of global migration, 22 February 2019**

Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for having us today to share UNDP’s experiences on this important topic. We would like to share particularly our experience in the Asia Pacific region with over 16 million people estimated in conditions of forced labour, the highest figure of any region in the world. The Greater-Mekong Sub-region features some of the most extensive flows of migration, forced labour and human trafficking, such as in the fishing and seafood industries, manufacturing, agriculture, construction, domestic work, sex work, or for forced marriage.

In this context, we work with COMMIT, the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking. This is the world’s only multilateral forum focused exclusively on trafficking. COMMIT is a formal sub-regional mechanism created in 2004 by the Governments of Cambodia, China, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Viet Nam and Thailand, to jointly counter significant human trafficking patterns affecting its members. UNDP supports COMMIT through UN-ACT – the UN-Action for Cooperation Against the Trafficking of Persons as its Secretariat. COMMIT’s current main priorities include strengthening labour migration systems and the empowerment of migrant workers as key trafficking prevention strategies, in collaboration with UN and civil society partners, as well as the development of interconnected national referral mechanisms.

Here UNDP’s development approach is to advance a rights-based, agency- and empowerment-oriented response. We advocate for more and better migration channels, with more protection for migrants - given the many gender-based barriers there are to migration opportunities, and noting the vulnerabilities that these create to abuse, exploitation and human trafficking.

Based on our experiences, I would like to share with you 3 key lessons learned for consideration in today’s deliberations. Firstly, while there are advances in the creation of new and revised policies and legal frameworks globally, more can and must be done in **areas of victim identification and support to victims of trafficking**. For example, in 2017 administrative data identified just over 100,000 trafficked persons, a small number compared to the estimated tens of millions of people in conditions of forced exploitation. In the Greater Mekong Sub-region, and with support from UN-ACT, COMMIT is establishing National and Transnational Referral Mechanisms, including improved victim identification systems based on standardized COMMIT indicators of human trafficking.

Such initial screening criteria must be broad, potentially capturing more rather than fewer individuals before they may be granted a trafficking status, followed by a reflection period for those preliminarily identified, during which essential services are provided and potential trafficked persons have access to relevant information and support to make an informed decision about their next steps, including whether or not to cooperate with authorities. During this process and beyond, firewalls between immigration authorities, on the one hand, and labour inspectors as well as victim support agencies, on the other, are crucial to incentivize people to speak up about their experiences of abuse and exploitation without fear of negative repercussions.

Secondly, interventions are best addressed at **strengthening community and network building, including by engaging workers as agents of change** in setting standards that their industry is to abide by, and in transferring knowledge among their peers about the rights that they have as workers and human beings. This needs to be coupled with channels to report violations that are reliable and capacitated to respond and draw upon protections granted under civil law and apply labour mechanisms.

For instance, given the array of problems that sex workers often experience when facing authorities, the involvement of civil society organizations is critical in these efforts. The ‘Can Do’ bar in Chiang Mai/Thailand, is owned and managed by a group of sex workers from a civil society organization, Empower. A community fund allows any sex worker to become part of the collective ownership of the business. The bar pays at or above minimum wage and has staff work a maximum of 8 hours per day with one day off per week, in accordance with Thai labour law. There are no salary cuts or withholding of wages and all overtime work is voluntary and fully compensated. Staff are encouraged to form or join workers’ associations or unions, and trainings and opportunities for further education are provided. Such empowerment approaches shifts the power balance in favour of those vulnerable to human trafficking and helping change negative societal attitude, which often provide a conducive environment for exploitation to flourish.

Thirdly, the recent Migration Report in Thailand revealed that while about half of the migrant workers in Thailand are women (50.2 per cent), **women migrants experience intersectional discrimination that often finds expression in less favorable working conditions**. Women’s work is undervalued, with wages systemically lower than those for nationals or men migrants. Moreover, the lack of formalization of several major sectors of women’s employment leads to women not being afforded basic labour rights. Because most women migrant workers are employed in low-skilled work within the informal economy, they are largely excluded from the benefits of increased labour mobility arrangements in the region. Gender equality must be more thoroughly mainstreamed into the regional trade, labour and migration policies and mechanisms for its impact on women migrants to be beneficial.

Finally, an emerging area of serious concern in the region is the rise in the **forced marriage** of women from Southeast Asia in China. In China, there is a high demand for partners from abroad as demographically there are tens of millions more men than women in marriageable age – an effect of the one-child policy and gender selection. One UN-ACT research on this found that marriage migration has become a viable option for women due to lack of access to education and economic opportunities. While marriages between different nationalities can be registered locally, international marriage brokerage is often prohibited leading potential migrants to enlist the services of irregular agents operating without transparency and oversight. This has also led to increasing cases of women left trapped after being tricked into marrying men overseas. A key recommendation is to facilitate migration opportunities for marriage through regularized and monitored services based on established standards and practices.

In conclusion, more than ever before we have an alignment of international legal frameworks, conventions, human rights instruments, the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda and Goals with the principle of Leaving No One Behind and the Global Compact on Migration. Let us work together to make sure that these work for the women, girls, men and boys who are, and at risk of being trafficked.

Thank you.