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**SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS,
ITS CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES**

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*Mr. President,
Distinguished Members of the Human Rights Council,
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,*

As I complete my first three-year term as Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, I am overcome with a feeling of deep concern. Concern may be an understatement, as it is a feeling that keeps me up at night.

Today, there is no doubt that women and girls globally are at a crossroad. Progress in women's political and economic participation is hampered due to alarming setbacks. Hard-won rights that we have taken for granted have regressed significantly.

These setbacks are most clearly exemplified by the blatant disregard for the safety, dignity, and humanity of women and girls in recent conflicts. Warring parties have shown contempt for international human rights and humanitarian laws designed to protect civilians, women and girls, as seen in Gaza, Haiti, Sudan, Ukraine— amongst others.

Other hard-won rights where we have seen significant erosion include restricted access of women and girls to sexual and reproductive health rights, attempts to decriminalize female genital mutilation, and the rise in child marriage – to mention a few.

Collectively, the international community has the resources to prevent and stop the killing, torture, maiming, subjugation, and erasure of women and girls. Yet, many countries, including affluent ones, have justified austerity measures to divert already limited resources away from grossly underfunded frontline services and organizations assisting and supporting victims of violence against women and girls. A couple of countries have closed the ministries of women affairs altogether or are considering it. It is unacceptable that resources are used to fuel merciless wars, but not to save lives of women and girls.

What is most concerning is the continued push in some countries to erase women as a specific group in society. This situation is particularly pronounced in Afghanistan, where women continue to be erased from public life and where we have just reached the grim milestone of 1,000 days of women and girls being denied secondary and tertiary education. In some countries, we also see other concerning attempts to erase women from language, and to deny their freedom to assemble, advocate and speak on issues that are important to them, including the centrality of being female to their lives.

In the face of such worrisome setbacks, it is imperative that relevant human rights mechanisms, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, be revitalized to take stock of the global situation and to improve prevention and response. We cannot miss the opportunity that Beijing +30 offers us to step up action to end violence, including to consider a proposal by four countries to adopt an optional protocol to the CEDAW Convention, specifically dedicated to ending violence against women and girls.

Continued support to international, regional and national human rights mechanisms dealing with women and girls will also be key, including to my mandate, which commemorates its 30th anniversary this year. The financial crisis at the UN has further undermined my capacity to act and engage with all of you and provide expertise, and I call on you to reinstate your financial and political commitment to the mandate.

Mr. President, distinguished delegates,

Today, I present to you my report on prostitution and violence against women and girls. I do so for the following reasons:

This honorable Council often refers to the inherent right of all humans to their humanity and dignity, irrespective of any considerations, including their sex. It also rightly refers to the duty of States not to leave those that are the most vulnerable and the most excluded behind. Prostituted women and girls constitute some of the most marginalized, violated, yet forgotten groups in society.

I am deeply troubled by the testimonies from survivors and victims of prostitution - accounts I guarantee would make the hair on our backs rise with terror, disgust and disbelief. It is crystal clear that the system of prostitution entails severe human rights violations, including physical, psychological, and economic violence. It results in grave human rights violations, such as torture, inhumane and degrading treatment, and infringes upon the right to safety, dignity, privacy, health, freedom of movement, and family. None of us in this room would willingly accept such a reality for ourselves, our daughters, mothers, or sisters. If given no other options, and under the situation of duress and coercion, we may however find ourselves with no choice but to accept such a life. Given these realities, I have come to the conclusion that prostitution cannot be described as work. As one survivor states: "No work involves a customer performing acts inside an employee's body."

This horrific reality affects millions of women and girls and is a human rights crisis, begging the question of why it has never been recognized as such. Given the grave denial of basic human rights of victims and survivors, we must resist every attempt to sanitize the harmful realities of prostitution, especially by using terminology that is not human rights centric and that does not reflect the reality. Only by calling issues, phenomenon, and relevant actors by the right terms, can we begin to address the issue properly.

It is high time that we recognize prostitution for what it truly is: a system of violence, exploitation, and abuse. A system that is made possible by an interplay of patriarchal norms, economic inequalities, and globalization that collectively and constantly normalize the commodification of women and girls. Of particular concern is how the system of prostitution sexualizes and racializes poverty as it preys on women from marginalized backgrounds, who often lack access to protection services or viable livelihood opportunities, which results in exacerbating their vulnerability to further exploitation. These structural inequalities that predominantly affect women and girls must be addressed, if we are to combat this issue effectively.

The other reason I have chosen to focus on this issue is the need to address the causes that underpin, enable and accelerate violence against women and girls. The perceived right of men to purchase sexual acts normalizes systematic violence against women and girls and blurs the line between consensual sex and sexual violence. This normalization has far-reaching impact on shaping the sexual expectations and behavior of men and boys. Moreover, the normalization of prostitution, including pornography, or filmed prostitution, creates harmful sexual expectations and undermines the safe and equal participation of women and girls in society. It also results in girls being severely distressed by the pornification and sexualization of women and girls, particularly in pornography.

Following an extensive review of legal and policy models presented in the report, I advocate for an abolitionist legal framework. States have a responsibility to protect and assist victims in a gender-sensitive manner. States should decriminalize prostitution for women and girls, treat them as victims of a cruel system of exploitation and abuse, and provide comprehensive support and exit pathways. Simultaneously, they must criminalize the purchase of sexual acts and take stringent actions against pimping. Anti-trafficking policies that create an artificial distinction between ‘forced’ and ‘free’ prostitution should not be misused.

In conclusion, victims of this vicious system of prostitution have endured too much violence and we must spare no time or effort to reverse the tide. Actions must be comprehensive and bold. Above all, they must be victim-centered, sex- and gender-responsive. They must also be primarily taken and led by States, who have the primary responsibility to protect and assist victims in a demand-driven way and address the underlying causes, including the structural marginalization of women and girls. In the words of another survivor: “To survive something as horrific as prostitution and then have to watch your Government endorse it is so incredibly dehumanizing and hurtful that it is impossible to put into words.”

I also present the report on my official country visit to Poland, which took place from 27 February to 9 March in 2023. I take the opportunity to thank the Government of Poland and all stakeholders I met with for their hospitality and excellent cooperation before, during and after my visit. Poland has made notable advancements in gender equality, particularly in promoting women’s economic independence and reducing the gender pay gap. Legal reforms have broadened the definition of domestic violence to encompass sexual, psychological, economic, and cyber violence. Simultaneously, I have observed considerable obstacles that women and girls in Poland face in accessing sexual and reproductive health rights as well as other restrictions on civil society and women organizations working on sexual and reproductive health rights, gender equality, and LGBTI and migrant rights. Furthermore, and while I acknowledge the immense hospitality that Poland has shown towards refugee women and girls from Ukraine, it is important that non-Ukrainian women and girls who need international protection are able to find protection in Poland and also to be given adequate assistance and support.

I remain ready to support the Governments and all stakeholders working to end violence against women and girls.

Thank you.