

Nusha Yonkova – Statement for the EWL working seminar on the reality of prostitution
1 October 2013, European Parliament

Dear Guests,

I have been asked to speak on behalf the European Network of Migrant Women, which I have the honor to presently chair. I will address you today not just as a chair but also as a woman, feminist, mother, immigrant, EU citizen and an anti-trafficking coordinator with the Immigrant Council of Ireland. Because the truth is I cannot properly remove any of these hats.

I am excited that the time has come to openly discuss prostitution at the highest possible levels in Europe, and I would like to particularly praise the European Women's Lobby for bringing forward such a discussion. I have been working actively with this issue for the last 6 years but there are women in this room and in Europe who have been campaigning for many years, and I would like to congratulate them today, as this day belongs to them. Last night we heard from our Swedish colleagues that it took 30 years of debate to get the law on prostitution right.

The European Network of Migrant Women, I represent, is an EU-level non-governmental organisation. We are a diverse umbrella of migrant oriented and feminist organisations that are united by a common understanding that migration and integration policies have to be gender sensitive because they affect migrant women and men in a different way.

Producing gender neutral legislation in the area of migration puts migrant women at a disadvantage, in the same way gender neutral approach in combatting human trafficking fails the vulnerable sexually-exploited women. We are relieved that the latest EU Directive on human trafficking goes some way to prevent this gender-neutral approach from being used in the future.

The first EUROSTAT report on trafficking published this year reminds that the most prevalent form of human trafficking by far is Trafficking for Sexual Exploitation. At the first ever Civil society forum on trafficking, in May, we were encouraged by European politicians, not to shy away from this fact but to clearly name it instead. **Sexual exploitation is our biggest human trafficking problem, and women and girls are once again at the receiving end of suffering.**

Trafficking for sexual exploitation is a crime that occurs within the system of prostitution. It is also a crime that is largely unpunished.

An increasing number of the victims are women of migrant background. In the present era of globalization, migration and prostitution are structurally linked. The laws regulating prostitution in our countries have to be revisited, and the demand for prostitution tackled. If we refuse to act now, we consciously fail those among us who are weaker and poorer.

Migrant NGOs, such as the members of the European Network of Migrant Women, have been responding to the complex needs of migrant women in prostitution for more than a decade by now. Today, these services struggle as they try to catch up with the ever expanding prostitution in the EU.

The extreme vulnerability of the women needing support, compel us, the NGOs, to lobby not just for funding for more support but also for an approach in Europe that will close the gap, where this deplorable exploitation occurs.

We support the Brussels Call initiative as we firmly believe that penalties for men who purchase sex together with supports for people selling sex is the only adequate and proven-to-be-efficient response to prostitution in contemporary Europe.

Let me paint a picture: As traffickers and pimps are making more money and their seedy business prospers, the hard fought for *respect to women* erodes. The mixing of sex with money becomes a culture and a norm. More men around Europe purchase sex. New terms to legitimise prostitution are appearing: sex work, escorts, migrant sex workers.

In that regard, it is most worrying that some academics are buying into these new terms finding them more scholarly and sterile. These scholars usually do not engage with analysis as to why their academic position fits so well with the interests of the pimps and other sexual organisers.

The new 'cleansed' words around prostitution are then academically linked with human rights. What are the outcomes? : botched perception of 'rights', harmful lobbyism and shifting of basic values.

Gone are the words 'pimp' and 'brothel'. Along these transformations, racism creeps in, as buyers search for 'exotic' and 'foreign' women.

The prevalence of migrant women in prostitution in most EU member states is an established fact today. Women living in poor economic conditions are deceived by an optimistic picture of income that can be earned in the sex industry. Many are also targeted and recruited by agencies. The legalized prostitution markets in several European countries are magnets for criminal organizers, ready to ship women from the poor ghettos of Eastern Europe or even from Africa.

These facts compel us to discuss prostitution with clear references to migration and migrant women. These facts also invite questions: In times of economic

crisis with high unemployment, with thriving racist attitudes, and cherished immigration/mobility restrictions:

Why such tolerance to the sex industry as some sort of a bizarre labour market for migrant women?

Do we really want to see a work authorisation for migrants to sell sex as nearly the only available 'occupation' for them?

We would like to remind that in countries with legalized prostitution, one of the most common penalty imposed is around the lack of a permit to be in the country or the lack of Work permit to sell sex. We do not want to see the migrant community stigmatized by such regulations and penalties.

Migrant groups must and should be a part of the discussion on the response to prostitution. This is why the European Network of Migrant Women takes this debate very seriously, and we value the invitation to address you today.

There are also clear examples of how migrant groups can influence and transform the debate on prostitution, and bring it back to the ground, and back to the present reality, where solutions could be sought.

An example of such transformative work has been done by the Immigrant Council of Ireland, who coordinate an impressive coalition of civil society organisations and unions in Ireland demanding from the legislators to end the unnecessary tolerance to indoor prostitution. And I am glad that Denise Charlton is here to update on this important work that aims at creating another zone free from prostitution in the North of Europe.

To all people advocating today for the rights of migrants, including those from the deprived communities around Europe, to prostitute themselves, we would remind that there are other valuable calls for positive/non-harmful opportunities for migrants, such as labour market access, qualification recognition and family reunification rights. Please come and support us on such calls. But please, do not designate migrant women to the area of prostitution by the use of term 'migrant sex worker', as this is both infantilising and insulting.

For all these reasons, the message of the European Network of Migrant Women message today is this:

We do not accept Prostitution as a real and acceptable alternative to employment of migrants in Europe. We urge the European Parliament, the European Commission and the Member States to tackle the demand for prostitution and sex trafficking strongly and unconditionally, in order to avoid turning migrant women into the new poor cohort of marginalised women satisfying the needs of a minority of entitled men in Europe.