

**LAURENCE ROSSIGNOL, FRENCH MINISTER OF FAMILIES, CHILDHOOD AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS**

Madame Consul of France [Anne-Claire Legendre],  
Excellencies,  
Dear Representatives of non-governmental organizations,  
Ladies and gentlemen,

First, I would like to thank the Consul-General, Mrs. Anne-Claire Legendre, as well as the Consulate General of France in New York, for organizing this event during the week dedicated to the status of women throughout the world.

I would like to also thank the Scelles Foundation, its president, Yves Charpenel, and its American partners, CATW (the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women) and SPACE International, two NGOs represented here today by their respective executive director, Mrs. Tania Bien-Aimé and Mrs. Rachel Moran.

We know that fighting against sexual exploitation, and more specifically against the exploitation of prostitution, constitutes a priority for the international community. Indeed, as early as 1949, the world adopted the Convention of the United Nations for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others. This convention, ratified by France in 1960, reminds us in its introduction that [and I quote] "prostitution, and the accompanying evil of human-trafficking for the purpose of prostitution, are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human person and endanger the welfare of the individual, the family and the community". [end of quote]

Yet, today, it seems a lot more difficult for the international community to reach a consensus regarding a measure aiming at discouraging the purchase of sexual acts by way of criminalizing the client. This is why an information-sharing event like this one is so important.

Sexual exploitation is the most widespread form of human trafficking in the world, in Europe and in France. Due to globalization, sexual commerce has reached an industrial scale at a planetary level that is alarming. Humans, most often women and children, are treated as merchandise.

Millions of people are being displaced from one country to another through networks of traffickers who exploit their extreme vulnerability due to their age or gender, or because they belong to a minority or are in a precarious economy situation.

It is well known that prostituted women and girls, who are already economically, socially, psychologically and physically vulnerable, become even more vulnerable once they become merchandise because prostitution multiplies their vulnerabilities.

It exposes the victims to many different forms of violence, in the streets, in clubs or on the Internet, whether they are prostituted women and girls on an occasional or regular basis, and whether they are French or foreign nationals. From humiliation to social stigmatization, poor treatment, torture and psychological violence, whether by pimps or by clients: the truth is that violence is everywhere in the world of prostitution. It is also inherent to the act of prostitution itself. To be repeatedly subjected to unwanted sexual acts is a physical burglary akin to rape. Whenever we use the word violence, it needs to be understood as covering many different forms of violence so as to properly reflect the scope and seriousness of the physical and psychological damage done to the victims.

Allow me to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the work done in the last 20+ years by the Scelles Foundation, an organization which has contributed to identifying all of the major issues related to prostitution throughout the world and has shown the world the true face of prostitution.

Indeed, we must start deconstructing the fictional narratives that some people are using as they try to make us accept the unacceptable by presenting prostitution as a "job", a business relation between freely consenting adults, or liberated sexuality, sometimes even as a form of empowerment in a patriarchal world.

No! In the world of prostitution, freedom is not on the side of prostituted women and girls, and the commercialization of their body must be treated as the ultimate stage of development of a free-market logic that knows no limits.

Freedom is on the side of prostitution networks and pimps, for whom such business is highly profitable. Human trafficking is one of the most developed criminal activities in the world, and the profits it helps generate are constantly on the rise. According to the ILO, they currently reach an estimated \$150 billion a year. By using human beings as sources of profits and

merchandise, traffickers violate the fundamental rights of those human beings in the most blatant and brutal way. Such is the reality of prostitution: It is a dehumanizing process reducing a person to a sexual object, and therefore it represents a serious assault on such person's dignity.

Therefore, prohibiting any purchase of sexual acts makes explicit and real our rejection of the idea that a human being can be treated as an object and as a subject of domination.

As is often the case, women and girls are the first victims. Let's not forget that prostitution is a gender issue: 85% of prostituted women and girls in France are women, and 99% of clients are men.

France is a destination country for prostitution networks, but also a transit country due to its central location within Europe.

The OCRTEH [Office central pour la répression de la traite des êtres humains], the French national office in charge of the fight against human trafficking, estimates that in 2015, there were 30,000 prostituted women and girls in France. Most of them were foreign nationals and under the control of a pimp or an exploitative network.

Since 2012, France has been fully mobilized to prevent and fight against human trafficking and prostitution. Such political will has been implemented through the following measures:

- The creation, in 2013, of the MIPROF [Mission interministérielle pour la protection des femmes contre les violences et la lutte contre la traite des êtres humains], the French inter-ministerial office for the protection of women against violence and for the fight against human trafficking, which is a national coordination body reporting directly to me;
- The implementation of our the first national action plan against human trafficking (2014-2016), based on an integrated approach to prevention, victim protection and prosecution of traffickers, including a number of measures targeting specifically victims of sexual exploitation and exploited minors;
- And finally, the enactment of the Law of April 13, 2016 "aiming at strengthening the fight against prostitution systems and at supporting prostituted women and girls", a legislation which represents for us a key lever for action.

Indeed, the enactment of such an abolitionist law represents a historical moment and, within the French society, it has truly changed the way prostitution is perceived because this law treats the issue of prostitution in a comprehensive way: harsher repressive measures against pimps, added support for victims of prostitution, pimping and human trafficking for any sexual exploitation purposes, prevention campaigns specifically targeting the youth and public opinion, and finally, prohibition of any sexual act purchasing.

The French Republic, which holds the legacy of the Enlightenment philosophers and is always eager to defend human dignity anywhere and everywhere it can, has expressed unequivocally its absolute commitment to recognize prostituted women and girls as victims in need of protection, and not as delinquents who should be criminally prosecuted.

This is precisely why this law has eliminated soliciting as a crime and has, instead, put in place a number of social policy measures aiming at helping prostituted women and girls exit the prostitution business by providing support to victims and insuring their protection. These measures are based on a comprehensive support system set up and coordinated between the regions that combines State-provided services (accessible through each local Prefecture and managed by regional committees reporting to the Prefects) with a number of services provided by local organizations.

This support system, which is gradually deployed in France, allows prostituted women and girls of any national origin to have access to a different life by entering a program helping them to exit the prostitution business and to enjoy a complete social and professional reintegration, with the support of a number of duly authorized civil society organizations. This program covers all their needs: financial assistance, access to healthcare, and easier access to housing and social housing. For some foreign nationals, the program can help them get a residence permit.

The political will of the French government has been demonstrated by a significant increase of the program budget, which has nearly tripled in the last 4 years, reaching 6.6 million euros in 2017, to which will be added the anticipated income from sales of goods and products seized from pimps and traffickers. This will allow us to provide both financial help to the program participants and grants to organizations that support prostituted

women and girls.

In order to fight efficiently against prostitution and its networks, a number of accountability mechanisms must be set up all along the prostitution chain. This is why, in addition to the above-mentioned social program, our law also provides for criminal prosecution. From now on, only the people in charge, in other words only networks, pimps and clients, can be prosecuted in France.

Buying any sexual act is prohibited and subject to criminal prosecution.

The fine for any client is 1,500 euros, and he receives a jail sentence if he paid for sex with a minor or a vulnerable person. Over a period of 10 months, 804 clients have been fined, a figure constantly on the rise and which shows the level of mobilization of our law enforcement units on the ground.

The justice system has been mobilized as well, thanks to our Ministry of Justice's criminal policy guidance provided to all judges, with a view to put to work our entire repressive legal arsenal.

That prostituted women and girls are particularly vulnerable has finally been recognized, and aggravating circumstances are now automatically added to the charges in case of violence, torture or acts of barbarism committed against a prostituted woman or girl.

Also, judges can now sentence clients to attend an awareness class on the fight against the commerce of sexual acts.

In addition to criminalizing clients and in order to reduce the demand level, a number of prevention and awareness communication campaigns targeting public opinion were launched in France, for instance during the 2016 European soccer championship and on the occasion of the European Day Against Human Trafficking.

An education policy on gender equality and sexuality is also being developed: It will include an information campaign targeting secondary schools and presenting the truth about prostitution and the commoditization of bodies.

Cyberspace has allowed for new forms of prostitution to emerge, but it also amplifies all existing forms by facilitating communication between traffickers, pimps, clients and prostituted women and girls. That is why

our law tightens the fight against pimps on the Internet. It renders accountable any access providers and any website hosting service providers by requiring them to contribute to the fight against the distribution of any sexual service offers related to prostitution networks, as well as to alert the authorities in case they notice any illegal content on their systems.

Transnational criminal organizations specializing in human trafficking are watching very closely what we are doing, we know that, and they are looking for loopholes. Those mafias hire their victims in their country of origin before taking them to a place where they don't know anyone, don't speak the local language, and are kept in indecent living conditions and subjected to unspeakable violence. These victims are forced to refund to the traffickers the very high cost of their migration, around 50,000 euros on average. The OCRTEH has strengthened its fight against those networks, including by working closely with other European countries, and in 2015 alone we have managed to dismantle 38 networks, arresting a total of 611 pimps in the process.

These networks only understand one thing: strength. Our message to them is this: France is not a host country for prostitution.

In its fight against prostitution and thanks to its ambitious social policy, France has now laid the foundation for a strengthened policy that both guarantees dignity for the victims and helps us fight vigorously against pimps and clients with a complete array of repressive legal tools.

Yet, it is critical that all countries participate in this effort, both at the European and international level, and join the fight against prostitution and sexual exploitation so that we can give back to the victims, who are viewed as servile objects, both their freedom and their dignity.

Thank you.