World Without Exploitation
The movement to end human trafficking and sexual exploitation

April 19, 2023

Letter from Survivors of the Sex Trade Opposing the National Survivor Network's Position to Decriminalize the Sex Trade

In January 2023, the National Survivor Network (NSN) published its report: "Care, Self-determination, and Safety: A Community-Centered, Public Health Approach to Preventing Human Trafficking" (the NSN Report), outlining its opinions on how to address and define human trafficking and sexual exploitation.

We, the undersigned survivors of the sex trade, find ourselves yet again disrespected and misrepresented by the NSN. We are reiterating that the NSN does not speak for us.

This is not the first time that we are challenging the NSN and rejecting its declarations. In May 2022, the NSN released a statement whose main objectives were to (1) condemn what is known as demand reduction strategies that curb the sex trade and prevent sex trafficking; (2) delegitimize and disparage advocates, activists and organizations, including survivor-led organizations dedicated to combating sex trafficking and serving survivors of sexual exploitation; and (3) call for the legalization and decriminalization of the sex trade, including pimping, brothel owning and patronizing.

Once again, the NSN Report is pushing an agenda that wants to (1) normalize sexual exploitation, (2) mask the devastating harms that people in the sex trade suffer by using terminology that promotes prostitution as "work" and calls for its legalization; and (3) ignore the root causes that drive marginalized people into the sex trade. By doing so, NSN ultimately betrays the people it claims to serve and in effect supports sex buying and the sex trade itself.

Survivors of prostitution and trafficking want to prevent and put an end to the buying and selling of human beings, overwhelmingly women of color, and know firsthand that the best way to do so is to ensure accountability for all exploiters and profiteers in the sex trade. The NSN Report celebrates sex buying and the system of prostitution, which is a standpoint we wholeheartedly reject.

We have collectively been bought, sold, rented, survived thousands of rapes and assaults, and have suffered countless acts of degradation during our years in the sex trade at the hands of sex buyers and our exploiters- all with impunity. We have been denied the tools and the right to exit prostitution.

Furthermore, the NSN Report neglects to mention the history of European colonization and the human trafficking of Africans across the Americas. The NSN fails to understand that the cultural and institutional elements that uphold the sex trade have their roots in

racism, misogyny, and state-sanctioned violence and discrimination. Proof of the legacy of that organized sexual violence and exploitation for pleasure and untold profits is the disproportionate percentage of Indigenous, Black and Brown women and girls found in the sex trade today. This power imbalance and the racial elements that underpin it are indistinguishable from what we observe in the system of prostitution today.

We know first-hand that prostitution is not a victimless crime because each of us has experienced– and even continues to experience significant consequential long-term physical and psychological harm. Many of us are direct service providers who witness every day the continuation of these human rights violations of the people we serve.

We vehemently reject the NSN Report's usage of the terms "sex work" and "sex worker," its idea that prostitution is a form of labor, and its call to decriminalize the sex trade. NSN's characterization of prostitution as "sexual labor" is a gift to sex buyers and the commercial sex industry.

We know that prostitution and commercial sex acts are neither sex, nor work, but the causes and consequences of an exploitative system rooted in gender-based violence, discrimination, and socio-economic inequalities related to sex, gender, race, ethnicity, poverty, and adverse childhood experiences.

The NSN Report solidifies the groundwork that perpetuates harmful cultural attitudes that view the commodification of human beings, primarily of women of color, and the purchase of sexual acts, as acceptable and benign. Prostitution can never be compared to, let alone justified through, other forms of labor in the United States.

The NSN Report defines "sex trades" as "different forms of sexual labor such as escort services, street-level sex work, pornography, exotic dancing, massage, internet work, and phone sex. The sex trades also include third-party support such as market facilitators, transportation, managers, bartenders, peer support, etc."

Contrary to NSN's [pimp-friendly] definition, the sex trade is a multi-billion-dollar global commercial sex industry that sells prostitution in all its forms, online and off, reaping its incalculable profits from the dollars of sex buyers who fuel it and incentivize sex trafficking.

We voice our strong and urgent opposition to any attempts to decriminalize or legalize the sex trade, as NSN promotes, including acts of pimping, brothel owning, "sex tourism," and sex buying, which fuels sex trafficking.

To be clear– we believe that people who are bought and sold in prostitution, whether trafficked or not, should never be arrested or criminalized for acts of prostitution, but rather offered comprehensive and trauma-informed services, as well as meaningful options to exit the sex trade if they so choose.

On NSN's false assumptions that we conflate sex trafficking and prostitution, NSN fails to understand the intricate connections between the two. In addition, many of NSN's pronouncements in both reports contravene U.S. federal laws and policies, as well as international laws governing human trafficking for purposes of sexual exploitation.

While not everyone in the sex trade may have been trafficked, the sex trade is where sex trafficking happens and in every case, sex buyers do not distinguish between someone who is a trafficking victim or a "willing participant." The violence and dehumanization they impart is the same in either case.

Contrary to the NSN Report's assertion that its goal is to "foster true agency to prevent exploitation" rarely does "agency" exist in exchanges of sexual acts predicated on unequal power between two parties. In prostitution, the sex buyer's money defines consent. The consent is his - not ours.

For the reasons stated in this letter, we believe that the NSN Report has a detrimental effect on the public's understanding of the complex mechanics of the sex trade, sex trafficking, sexual exploitation and its catastrophic consequences on individuals and society.

We will not stand by and allow the sex trade to be tolerated, applauded, legalized or decriminalized by anyone or any network. Too many lives are at stake.

Sincerely,

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