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Ms. Reem Alsalem

UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls

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Thank you, Ambassador Michel Veuthey of the Sovereign Order of Malta, and the colleagues at UNITAR, for the kind invitation to be part of this important event and for giving me the opportunity to be in the company of such distinguished speakers.

There is no doubt that the adoption of the Palermo Protocol, 25 years ago, marked a significant milestone in increasing the protection of women and children, including girls, from violence.

It provided the first internationally agreed-upon definition of trafficking in persons, emphasizing the exploitation of women and children, and enabling over 180 countries to align their domestic laws with an international standard. It has facilitated a unified approach to criminalizing trafficking, focusing on prevention, protection, and prosecution—the "3 Ps." For women and girls, this has meant greater visibility of their vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation, forced labor, and other abuses.

The Protocol has also significantly raised global awareness about human trafficking, particularly its disproportionate impact on women and girls, who constitute the majority of identified victims. Many countries have enacted or strengthened anti-trafficking laws, established national task forces, and created victim support systems.

More importantly, the Protocol has mandated protection and assistance for victims, including women and girls, rather than treating them as criminals. This shift has led to the development of shelters, counseling, and reintegration programs in various regions. It has also emphasized the non-punishment principle, ensuring that trafficked women and girls are not penalized for acts they were forced to commit.

By linking trafficking to transnational organized crime, the Protocol has fostered cross-border collaboration. It has spurred joint investigations, extraditions of perpetrators, and intelligence sharing.

Finally, one cannot speak of the Palermo Protocol’s achievements without highlighting its focus on prevention, through education campaigns and economic empowerment programs aimed at reducing the vulnerability of women and girls. These initiatives have sought to tackle root causes like poverty, gender inequality, and lack of education, which disproportionately affect women and girls.

Nevertheless, we must remain candid about the limitations of its implementation.

First, and despite widespread ratification, implementation remains uneven. Many countries lack the resources, political will, or infrastructure to enforce anti-trafficking laws effectively. For women and girls, this means that legal protections often exist on paper but not in practice—particularly in low-income or conflict-affected regions where exploitation is rampant.

Second, the Protocol's emphasis on prosecution has overshadowed prevention and protection. As a result, the root causes affecting women and girls—such as poverty, displacement, and lack of opportunities—persist, limiting long-term impact. The implementation of Article 9, which addresses demand, is even more problematic as it faces a lack of political will globally.

Third, the Protocol's broad definition of trafficking, while a strength for flexibility, has led to inconsistent application. Terms like "exploitation" and "sexual exploitation" remain undefined. This ambiguity has sometimes diverted resources away from protecting women and girls, diluting the focus on genuine victims.

Fourth, while the Protocol calls for victim assistance, many trafficked women and girls still lack access to adequate services. Identification processes are often tied to cooperation with law enforcement, deterring victims from coming forward due to fear of deportation or retribution. Moreover, support systems are often underfunded, leaving survivors without sustained help for recovery or reintegration.

Fifth, through Article 9(5), States must actively reduce demand for prostitution, not just trafficking, as a preventive measure against exploitation. Unfortunately, by decriminalizing or legalizing the purchase of sexual acts, some States fuel the exploitation that is outlawed by the Protocol and other international laws. As I stated in my report to the Human Rights Council on prostitution and violence against women and girls, the criminalization of the purchase of sexual acts must not be contingent upon proving a potential situation of trafficking. Article 9(5) of the Palermo Protocol speaks of preventing all forms of exploitation, including prostitution, irrespective of whether trafficking has occurred. The Nordic/Equality Model is visionary in that it criminalizes the purchase of sexual acts and mandates education campaigns on the harms of buying sexual acts as key components of an effective response.

Sixth, the proliferation of global crises, underfunded humanitarian responses, and restrictive migration policies have inadvertently increased the vulnerability of women and girls to trafficking, pushing desperate individuals into the hands of traffickers, undermining the Protocol's protective intent.

To summarize, the Protocol's legacy is a mixed one: it has provided tools and momentum, but the scale of trafficking against women and girls underscores the need for a more holistic, rights-based approach—one that tackles root causes and prioritizes survivor empowerment over punitive measures alone.

I now pivot to say a few words about the issue of training and capacity building, as I have been requested, and the ways these can be harnessed to improve the implementation of the Protocol.

First, it is important to remember that the Palermo Protocol does not invalidate or supersede any treaties. When I presented my report on prostitution and violence against women and girls in June 2024, some critics argued that the Palermo Protocol somehow miraculously superseded the 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, which focused on the relationship between trafficking and the exploitation of prostitution.

The fact that the 1949 Convention preceded the Palermo Protocol and paved the way for it does not mean that the latter supersedes or nullifies it. Therefore, my first recommendation for training is to share how international law works.

Moreover, capacity building is still needed around the issue of consent. The Palermo Protocol includes a non-exhaustive list of exploitation types and clarifies that consent is irrelevant if coercive means are used, with special provisions for children. I am issuing an addendum to my report to the Human Rights Council in June 2024 to further unpack the concept of consent.

It is important to recall that regarding the "means of recruitment" in the Protocol, it mentions "giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent." This is relevant to the exploitation of prostitution that drives trafficking in women and children. As such, the Protocol provides a clear way for States to address prostitution from the perspective of trafficking prevention—an opportunity that has been missed or ignored by many States so far.

In addition, while the Palermo Protocol does not explicitly use the term "intersectional" or "intersectionality," the need for an understanding of the intersectionality of discrimination is implicit throughout. Even though the Protocol's scope includes all victims, regardless of their sex, age, or background, there is a clear recognition embedded in the Protocol that women—as well as children, particularly girls—constitute most victims of sexual exploitation.

This is evidenced by global statistics on trafficking and has not changed from the time the Protocol was drafted. Additionally, the position of vulnerability that the Protocol explicitly invokes in its definition of trafficking is clearly illustrated in women's unequal global access to resources, the disproportionate burden of care they carry, and the greater statistical likelihood that women are victims of sexual violence.
Furthermore, Article 3(c) specifies that the trafficking of children requires no coercive means—only the intent of exploitation—recognizing age-based vulnerability as a distinct category.

Considering these facts, it is essential that the concept of "vulnerability" in the Protocol be taken very seriously by implementing parties. This includes always paying attention to the victim's status and applying a disaggregated approach to data collection, identification, prevention, and protection.

In mandating States to consider implementing measures to provide for the recovery of victims, the Protocol also asks States to do so in a manner that considers the age, gender and special needs of victims. Unfortunately, many States fail to train law enforcement, social workers, and justice officials on these intersecting vulnerabilities and often ignore them by adopting one-size-fits-all assistance programs and generic victim identification approaches.

I will stop here. Thank you very much for your attention.