Submission to the

United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women

General Comment on

Trafficking of Women and Girls in the Context of Global Migration

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*Introduction:*

The interdisciplinary Working Group on Human Rights and the Civic Media Lab at The American University of Paris welcome the Committee’s initiative to prepare a General Comment on trafficking of women and girls in the context of global migration. We are honored to have the opportunity to share our research concerning the nexus of climate disasters and trafficking, and the disproportionate impacts on women. We believe it is critical when looking at trafficking in the context of global migration that the General Comment acknowledge the effect of climate disasters on global migration patterns and the corresponding spikes in trafficking that occur in relation to those disasters. This climate disaster-trafficking nexus is especially significant for the work of this Committee because women are both more vulnerable to climate disasters and to traffickers that prey on vulnerable groups after disaster strikes. These impacts are exacerbated by global climate change, which increases both the frequency and severity of climate disasters.

Eradicating human trafficking requires eliminating or mitigating contributing factors, coordinating action across international boundaries, implementing robust and effective legislation and policy, and collecting accurate, useful data. We believe that the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) provides clear obligations that should inform State Parties’ decisions relevant to this climate disaster-trafficking nexus as it specifically affects women.

*Asymmetrical Impacts of Climate Change on Women*

In addition to strictly environmental impacts, it is well established that consequences of climate disasters include political and economic instability, mounting inequality, food and water insecurity, and increased threats to health and livelihoods. These risks are heightened as the frequency and severity of weather and climate hazards increases in the context of climate change. Correspondingly, the vulnerability of affected communities is heightened, despite the fact that many of the most vulnerable populations have contributed the least to climate change.

Historically, the impacts of climate disasters are borne disproportionality by women and girls. As noted in General Comment No. 37, more frequent and severe climate disasters create contexts that exacerbate “pre-existing gender inequalities” and “compound the intersecting forms of discrimination” against women. As a result, women and girls “are more likely to be exposed to disaster-induced risks and losses” but “are less able to adapt to changes in climatic conditions.”

These vulnerabilities can be identified before a climate disaster begins. For example, due to discriminatory laws and social policies that limit women’s access to secure land tenure, women are often allotted land of an inferior quality. A consequence of inferior quality is the land is more prone to adverse climatic events like flooding, erosion, and drought. Women are also more vulnerable because they are more likely to live in inadequate housing in areas prone to climate disasters.

Women are also more exposed to risks and losses during and after climate disasters. For example, women suffer from malnourishment and malnutrition, and have higher mortality and morbidity rates, in part because of unequal access to adequate healthcare, food, and clean water, and because they are called on to provide for the sick. Women are also more likely to have access to other rights severely disrupted during and after a climate disaster. When schools are damaged and families are pressed with severe economic hardship, girls face greater obstacles going to class. When basic infrastructure systems are destroyed and social programming restricted, women and girls shoulder increased burdens in caregiving and domestic work, thereby limiting the time available to engage in economic activity and access other resources needed for recovery, adaption, and rebuilding.

*Climate Disaster-Human Trafficking Nexus*

Critically, women face heightened risks of gender-based violence during and after climate disasters. While there is limited academic study of the nexus at present, there is plenty of anecdotal research showing spikes in trafficking and exploitation after climate disasters, including after the catastrophic 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami, the 2007 Cyclone Sidr and 2009 Cyclone Alia in Bangladesh, and the 2010 earthquake in Haiti. The aftermath of disasters creates fertile grounds for trafficking, and women and girls are much more likely to be affected.

To better understand the documented correlation between climate disasters and trafficking, it is helpful to group climate disasters into two categories: sudden-onset and slow-onset disasters. Sudden, rapid-onset disasters – such as earthquakes, flooding, hurricanes, and tsunamis – are extreme, and often unexpected, climate events. Survivors without access to social safety nets find themselves “instantly plunging…into poverty” and extreme vulnerability. (*The Climate Change-Human Trafficking Nexus*, Int’l Org. for Migration). If available, some move into displacement camps, and others embark on irregular migration, believing that to be the only feasible option. Slow-onset events take place over a longer period and have a slower rate of impact, but are no less destructive. Examples of slow-onset disasters include drought, erosion, rising sea levels, and increased temperatures. Slow-onset disasters disproportionately affect populations engaged in natural resource-based livelihoods, putting pressure on existing resources and forcing them to seek alternative means to diversify incomes. In desperation, many migrate internally – often into urban slums – or across international borders in search of new opportunities.

In both cases, increased vulnerability correlates to significant increases in trafficking and exploitation. Increased trafficking has been documented both at the source (the place where the climate disaster occurred) and the destination (where people move to in response). In sudden-onset disasters, existing trafficking networks are strengthened or new “hot-spots” created; in slow-onset disasters, new trafficking networks are established along migration routes.

**Recommendations:**

1. ***State Parties must adopt a holistic approach to identifying and understanding the underlying causes of trafficking that recognizes climate disaster vulnerability.***

State Parties should be encouraged to identify the potential extent and degree of both sudden and slow-onset climate disasters. Taking this information into account, State Parties must also monitor trends and analyze the impacts of those risks to understand how they create or exacerbate contributing factors to trafficking within regional and domestic contexts. That knowledge must then be integrated into state policies, and the standard operating procedures of government organizations and partner NGOs working on anti-trafficking measures. Special attention should be paid to areas where traditional livelihoods are seriously threatened.

State Parties should also be encouraged to develop comprehensive policies and programs to eliminate or transform the structures of vulnerability that make women and girls disproportionately susceptible to climate disasters. Appropriate measures may include: land tenure reforms; equal access to adequate housing that can reasonably sustain climate disasters; equal access to adequate food, water, and healthcare; social safety-net policies that are gender-responsive; and equal access to reliable, safe employment opportunities.

1. ***State Parties must identify potential “hotspots” or routes linked to climate disasters, and monitor them during and after natural disasters.***

Once State Parties recognize climate disasters as a contributing factor to trafficking, State Parties can begin to identify high-risk trafficking areas before sudden disasters strike, or in the early stages of slow-onset disasters. With this knowledge, State Parties must identify potential sources and destinations, and must actively monitor high-risk areas and routes.

1. ***State Parties must integrate anti-trafficking measures into climate disaster readiness and response plans, and should encourage non-state actors to do so as well.***

State Parties are obligated to take “all appropriate measures” to prevent trafficking. Disaster readiness and response plans must include preventative anti-trafficking measures and mechanisms to protect victims. Particular attention must be paid to temporary internally displaced persons camps and settlements, which can become trafficking hot-spots. Appropriate measures may include: setting up a registration database; ensuring a secure environment (e.g. proper lighting); monitoring entry/exit points; training local officials and camp management on anti-trafficking measures; and establishing referral mechanisms for suspected cases of trafficking or exploitation. State Parties must also consider durable solutions for long-term displaced persons, as well as re-integration and support for victims of human trafficking.

1. ***State Parties must ensure that businesses are not involved in, facilitate and/or benefit from trafficking within their supply chains, and must effectively remedy violations and punish perpetrators.***

Recalling State Parties’ responsibility to protect against human rights abuses by third parties, including business, State Parties must ensure domestic law and policy prohibits the exploitation of trafficked persons in the private sector across global supply chains. State Parties should also consider other policy tools to prevent businesses from engaging in activities that make women more vulnerable to climate disaster. This intersection of business and human rights is particularly relevant to trafficking in the context of climate disaster, as environmental destruction that makes land more susceptible to climate disasters is often driven by resource extraction by business. Furthermore, it must be noted that at the bottom of the supply chain for resource extraction are victims of modern slavery and human trafficking. State Parties should acknowledge this relationship, and should work with businesses to address the underlying conditions that create vulnerability and to end trafficking and exploitation in the private sector.

*Contributions to this submission were made by the following members of the Working Group on Human Rights at The American University of Paris: Basia-Marie Diagne, Eliza Fike, and Gabriel Green.*