

MEDIA RELEASE

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TOURISM OPENS DOORS FOR WOMEN – DOES IT?

The UN provides an useful service to the world community when it frequently declares special Days to focus on issues that are of concern to communities and nations.

The UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO) marks 27 September as a World Tourism Day, with Sri Lanka as a host country.

The Ecumenical Coalition on Tourism (ECOT) believes that the theme – Tourism Opens Doors For Women – hardly reflects the reality of women in tourism. While ECOT acknowledges instances when women do benefit from tourism, this unfortunately does not apply to the majority of women involved in the world of tourism. Even the facts listed in the UNWTO Message by Secretary-General Francisco Frangialli point to the sheer disadvantage women face on a global scale. There is a plethora of statistics and reports around the world that bear this out.

ECOT strongly believes that a Tourism that is associated with prostitution, and the human trafficking that accompanies it increasingly, in no way 'opens doors for women'. A Tourism that is propped up by images of women and the lure of sexual pleasures is not one that liberates women.

Yes, handicrafts and other items produced by women do attract the tourist dollar. But is the price paid for these products just? Are the wages of women in these enterprises fair? Is the trivialization of culture that occurs in various tourist destinations when women are dressed in indigenous dress as if in a costume to attract the tourist camera the way to open doors for women? Do women have a voice in the decision making that determines the nature of tourism in their environment?

Would it be more appropriate to conclude that 'tourism closes doors for women'? How else could one view a reality wherein women are treated on the basis of sexual and gender stereotypes, with most women not sharing power and resources equitably? Such a situation is not helped when there is serious conflict as is the case with the host country for this year's World Tourism Day. Sri Lanka has seen a violent conflict rage for years while the control of its tourism is not widely shared.

It is well demonstrated that poverty is a major reason that drives women to tourism. If the quality of life of women improved, conventional tourism will be less attractive to them. The UN has given the world a set of goals known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with the hope that world poverty will be halved by 2015. Any real progress towards such an outcome would truly open doors and opportunities for women.

The UNWTO is 'committed to Tourism, Travel and the MDGs'. ECOT calls on the UNWTO to reflect the perspective of women who are disadvantaged and discriminated by tourism.

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