

Statement of Kulsoom K. Ijaz
On Behalf of The Coalition Committed To Ending The Criminalization of Poverty
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Thank you, Mr./Madam President, Excellencies, and Distinguished Delegates.

My name is Kulsoom Ijaz, and I speak on behalf of a U.S. civil society coalition committed to ending the criminalization of poverty and ensuring the right of all people to live with dignity. Thank you for this opportunity to engage in the United States' review, given our deep concern over its failure to implement past recommendations and its alarming regression on human rights.

The U.S. continues to criminalize survival—targeting people for being unsheltered, housing-insecure, pregnant, birthing, transgender, engaged in sex work, survivors of violence, and even those who provide them with support. Rather than addressing structural inequities, the U.S. increasingly invests in policing and punishment over compassion and resources. These practices amount to cruel, inhuman, and degrading treatment, defying longstanding UN and Member State recommendations.

I will address four areas of particular concern.

I. Homelessness

Since 2006, laws banning sleeping in public have increased by 50%. In 2024, homelessness reached a record high of at least 770,000, and the U.S. Supreme Court allowed local governments to criminalize sleeping outside even where no shelter exists. Today, over 320 laws across states and municipalities criminalize homelessness.

Encampment sweeps—often with militarized enforcement—destroy belongings and increase public health harms. Last month's federal Executive Order redirected resources toward forcibly committing unsheltered individuals by dismantling judicial safeguards and incentivizing states to criminalize homelessness. The president has since deployed the National Guard and ordered hundreds of federal law enforcement agents to immediately remove poor people and those without housing from the nation's capital, further weaponizing these vulnerable groups as violent and undeserving of legal protections.

Roughly one-fifth of unsheltered people live with severe mental health conditions. Yet the federal government recently cancelled \$11.4 billion in mental health and substance use funding. Nearly one-third first encounter mental health services through law enforcement, by whom they are 16 times more likely to be killed.

The crisis deepens as the federal government suspended all grants for unsheltered people unless service providers adopted anti-immigrant and anti-transgender restrictions. ICE raids on

homeless shelters have chilled migrants from seeking refuge. In Los Angeles alone, 3,000 shelter residents were arrested in a mass deportation campaign.

These measures ignore recommendations from Ethiopia, Cuba, Malta, and others to decriminalize poverty and invest in housing.

II. Pregnant, Birthing, and Postpartum People

In 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court dismantled core reproductive health protections. Nearly half the states have since criminalized the provision of abortion care, and several criminalize those who help others obtain it, including those assisting people too poor to afford out-of-state travel for care. This has led to preventable deaths where abortion could have saved a patient's life, and the rapid expansion of areas without maternal healthcare, as clinicians flee hostile states.

In the first year after the Supreme Court decision, over 210 pregnant people were criminally charged for their prenatal conduct or pregnancy outcomes, including abortion, miscarriages, and stillbirths. Disproportionately people living in poverty are criminalized in relation to their pregnancy. Hospitals, which should be sanctuaries of care, violate patient privacy as states deputize them to report pregnant patients to authorities, making people fear seeking care, and worsening negative maternal and infant health outcomes.

The U.S. has the highest maternal mortality rate among wealthy nations, with Black women disproportionately impacted. Black and Indigenous populations face steep hurdles in accessing care due to racial bias in clinical settings and healthcare deserts, yet instead of expanding access and addressing needs, some states restrict or criminalize midwifery and cultural birthing practices, critical lifelines for communities facing these barriers.

All of these measures contradict prior UPR recommendations from Mexico, Malaysia, Iceland, Denmark, France, Luxembourg, Canada, and Australia.

III. Sex Workers and Survivors of Violence

The U.S. conflates consensual sex work with trafficking while continuing to enforce laws that exacerbate exploitation of all those working in the sex trades, whether under coercion or not. Sex workers are also subject to raids, coercive and unconstitutional arrests and resulting immigration consequences, and civil asset forfeiture. Arrests disproportionately target immigrant women of color. Seventy percent of incarcerated women are survivors of intimate partner violence. Many are prosecuted for acts of survival and denied self-defense claims that account for the coercive circumstances they faced.

These carceral practices ignore recommendations from Malta, France, and Iceland to end gender based discrimination, and from Greece to ensure services for survivors, including those in detention.

IV. Trans and Gender-Nonbinary People

At least 25 states criminalize or prohibit gender-affirming healthcare for transgender minors, with six making its provision a felony, while carving out an exemption for nonconsensual surgeries on intersex infants and children. Other states criminalize restroom use consistent with gender identity. The U.S. Department of Justice has also signaled intent to prosecute gender-affirming care providers.

These measures worsen socio-economic inequities, particularly for youth and Black transgender women, who already face disproportionate violence in shelters and on the streets, and defy recommendations from Malta and France.

Recommendations: We urge Member States to recommend that the United States:

1. Abolish the criminalization of poverty and repeal laws and policies that punish marginalized communities and their support systems.
2. Divest from carceral systems and invest in nutrition assistance programs and universal healthcare consistent with medical and human rights standards.
3. Guarantee adequate, affordable, and culturally appropriate housing for all.

Conclusion: At every level of governance, the United States must abandon punitive approaches to poverty, public health, and survival, and fulfill its obligations through urgent, tangible action.

Thank you.