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"... the commercial sexual exploitation of children is an atrocity. It has rightly been called the ultimate evil. It denies children their fundamental rights. It has devastating psychological and physical consequences for them. It is a perversion of the natural order - adults should be there to protect and nurture children, not take advantage of their emotionally and physically vulnerable state."

Peter Piot, Executive Director, UNAIDS

Background

Commercial sexual exploitation of children is both old and new, old in that it includes traditional practices, and new in that globalization and advances in technology are posing a different set of challenges to the problem. Sexual abuse of children entails economic, social and political aspects, and it takes place in most countries. The global sex sector is growing, as is the demand for increasingly younger children, facilitated by inadequate government interventions and lax law enforcement, particularly in terms of protective measures for children. ¹

The underlying causes of commercial sexual exploitation of children are diverse and include war, natural disasters, economic injustice and disparities between rich and poor, large-scale migration and urbanization.² They also include societal and family disintegration, lack of protection available to children at risk and under-funding or failure of social services.³ Legal systems commonly fail to prevent injustice toward children or to protect them from criminal acts, and systems of governance more often than not display indifference toward exploitation of children.⁴ Further, discrimination, gender gaps in education and a double standard of morality for men and women contribute to a climate of inequality and exploitation.⁵

The sex sector involves pornography, prostitution and trafficking in children for sexual purposes and for a profit. ⁶ Child exploiters are known to deliberately seek occupations that bring them into frequent contact with children, and can often be found even among the most highly esteemed members of a society. Pedophiles constitute a significant group of the offenders. The child victims of commercial sexual exploitation are both boys and girls, although they are primarily girls between 10 and 18 years of age. Research suggests that the age of the children involved is decreasing, and sexual exploitation of children as young as 6 has been documented. ⁷

The commercial sexual exploitation of children is an issue of health and it is a concern for public health.⁸ The consequences for abused and exploited children include profound physical, developmental, emotional and social problems.⁹ Many suffer from a range of illnesses, including TB, respiratory problems, headaches, exhaustion, results of infections and wounds, the effects of substance abuse, sexually transmitted diseases, from injuries

resulting from violence inflicted either by those involved in controlling and organizing the sexual transactions, or resulting from self-harm. They may be malnourished or debilitated because of the inevitable hazards of a poor living environment, of poverty or from neglect. [10](#)

In the past, emphasis was placed on addressing the supply side of the phenomenon through, for example, anti-poverty measures, social development and income generation schemes for families.[11](#) It is increasingly recognized, however, that the demand side is a crucial area of concern; the sex exploiters, the customers and the sex sector and its actors need to be targeted[12](#) in developing measures to combat the problem.

Children as Commodities

In the industrialized countries, the structure and function of the family appear to be significant factors in children becoming victims of sexual exploitation.[13](#) Economic inequalities, domestic violence and abuse, family disintegration, drug addiction, and lack of support structures and inadequate social services are increasingly recognized as factors leading to the spread of child prostitution, particularly among teenagers. It is known that there are increasingly large numbers of children employed in the sex trade in New York, London, Paris, Sydney and other major cities.[14](#)

In the developing countries, macro social and economic factors appear to be important determinants. An increase has been noted in commercial sex in many countries undergoing structural adjustment; social, political and economic upheavals have caused an increase in economic disparities. In conditions of poverty and war, family breakdowns occur, exposing children to widespread and systematic abuse and leaving them isolated and vulnerable to exploitation.[15](#) Many developing countries have in the recent past struggled with profound changes caused by political and economic crises. Communities and families have been weakened, and poverty has become deeper and more intractable. Children from poor communities where economic prospects or opportunities are bleak or non-existent are most at risk, resulting in the emergence of large numbers of children and young people living or working on the streets.[16](#)

Research and monitoring

The extent and documentation of commercial sexual exploitation of children continues to be a challenge due to a lack of uniform definition of what child sexual exploitation entails. Few examples exist of rigorous research, existing data is characterized by a poor understanding and use of quantitative information. It has also been hampered by lack of data presented within a cultural context and by the shifting global patterns in the sexual exploitation of children. Most countries collect information about children, but few are able to produce comprehensive up-to-date statistics on the health of their children. The data is commonly concerned with two age groups: children under five years of age, concentrating on health aspects, and adolescents over the age of fifteen, focusing on employment, sexuality and drug use. Researchers recommend that data be collected for the age group 5 - 15 years, especially with regard to information on violations of rights, exploitation or abuse, accidents and injuries, child homicides, and illnesses related to the work environment. According to UNICEF, "this failure to monitor the effects of economic and social changes on the most vulnerable is both a cause and a symptom of the lack of political priority afforded to this task".[17](#)

To ensure that children benefit from the protection international conventions have been designed to give, practical indicators are needed, based on reliable statistical data relevant to regional, national and local situations.[18](#) Researchers argue that children's rights, and the responsibility of the government, community and family towards its children should be the starting point in developing a framework for measurement and monitoring.

Child pornography

There is a substantial market for child pornography worldwide, and the increase in the production and distribution of child pornography has become easier and less risky due to the availability of more advanced and less expensive technology. ¹⁹ Child pornography is not only a commercial endeavor but there is considerable exchange and sharing of material by individuals around the globe. There has been a major increase in the commercial production of child pornography since the early 1970s and computer bulletin boards and other on-line services have become a major avenue.²⁰ In the 1980s, Europe was pointed to as the source of most pornographic films and photos, particularly Denmark and Holland. More recently, much of the industry has shifted to Eastern Europe and to Southeast Asia. Currently Japan is the largest producer and consumer of child pornography in the world, and the USA remains a major market for child pornography. Many web sites provide materials that are legal in the countries where they are created - these are often societies which lack laws protecting children against kidnapping for sexual exploitation. In Asia alone, more than 100 web sites exist to promote teenage commercial sex.²¹ In 1995, studies in the United States documented one million on-line pornographic images involving children.

Children who have been in the production of pornography commonly show a multitude of symptoms, such as emotional withdrawal, anti-social behavior, mood swings, depression, fear and anxiety. A strong link has been noted between child pornography and child prostitution, and these children are at high risk of later becoming exploiters themselves.²²

Child prostitution

Prostitution is one of the most alienating forms of child labor. Force is used to confine the children, and they can rarely seek help or be reached. They have no ability to negotiate the terms of their employment, they are commonly sold, trafficked, tricked or lured.²³ The child victims of the industry are most often from the poorest sections of society.

Family or community members may knowingly sell children to brothel agents or pimps or unwittingly sell them into prostitution in the mistaken belief that the go-between will find them work in a factory or as domestic help.²⁴ Some children are kidnapped or lured by traffickers with promises of employment only to end up in brothels.

Child prostitution has become a multi-million dollar a year business; it is an organized industry with clients, traders, distribution routes and outlets, originating partly as a response to demand from tourists. International tourism has become a leading sector in world exports and is the biggest employer in the world: every 6th job in the world on average is somehow depending on or related to travel and tourism.²⁵ Tourism is not the cause of sexual exploitation of children; it does, however, provide easy access to vulnerable children. Many US and European travel agencies set up sex tours for thousands every year. The flow of sex tourists is mainly from the economically developed world: to date, clients are mainly men from the U.S., Germany, Sweden, Australia, and Japan. In addition, the impact of local tourism is increasing and many customers are from neighboring countries.²⁶

International tourism organizations have been unanimous in condemning the use of tourism for the purpose of sexual exploitation of children, and discussions are on-going on how the tourism industry can help bring an end to this practice.²⁷ However, many countries struggling with weak economies rely on tourism as their primary industry, and while some countries view sex tourism as an unwanted but unavoidable part of tourism development, in many cases the governments directly tolerate sex tourism in pursuit of economic development.²⁸

The symptoms experienced by child prostitutes are similar to those reported by other sexually abused children, such as depression, self destructive tendencies, inability to enter mainstream of society and ostracism.²⁹ Child victims of prostitution may experience a lifetime of recurrent illnesses, such as venereal diseases, fertility problems,

pregnancy complications, malnutrition and tuberculosis.

Children and AIDS: A Public Health Concern

The demand for children for sex has increased dramatically in recent years, partly due to the belief that children are less susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases, and that sex with children is safer. To meet the demand for virgins, agents have intensified the recruitment of very young girls from remote villages and across borders, particularly in Asia. In reality, children are especially vulnerable. They are biologically more susceptible to sexually transmitted diseases, infections and injuries.

Children involved in the sex trade face new and potentially fatal dangers in light of the spread of HIV/AIDS. ³⁰ It is estimated that seven thousand young people aged 10-24 are infected with HIV every day. Researchers estimate that by the year 2000, ten million children will have been orphaned because of AIDS, placing a severe burden on health services. ³¹

Child prostitutes may pose a greater public health danger than adult prostitutes, because children are weak, vulnerable and uninformed, and not in a position to seek out medical care if they become infected with a sexually transmitted disease. ³² They are an important link in the chain of transmission from the sex sector to the population at large because it involves clients who have unprotected sex with their spouses or others.

The Scope of the Problem

The illicit recruitment and sale of children across national borders, between developing and developed countries, and among developed countries is an organized industry ranging from small businesses to large enterprises. The business involves deception, kidnapping and enslavement, smuggling, false passports, bribery and corruption. Powerful interests control and maintain the structures within the sex sector.³³ National case studies indicate that the sex sector continues to flourish partly because it is protected and supported by corrupt politicians, police, armed forces and civil servants who receive bribes, demand sexual favors and are themselves customers or owners of brothels.³⁴

The growth of the sex sector is closely tied to economic progress and modernization, and it may be an intentional policy of some countries to promote prostitution as an economic activity. Government policies, such as for the promotion of tourism, migration for employment and the export of female labor are large and significant sources of foreign exchange earnings, and may have indirectly encouraged the growth of prostitution and sale and trafficking in children. ³⁵ Other policies may also have led to the growth of the sex sector through their impact on poor families and the strategies adopted by them for survival, especially in the absence of social safety nets.

Due to the criminal nature of the sex sector, precise figures on the number of children involved are difficult to obtain. In Asia, because groups working against the commercial sexual exploitation of children have been active for a relatively long time, data are more complete. The 1996 report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography estimates that about one million children in Asia alone are victims of the sex trade. According to the International Labor Organization, the problem is especially alarming in Korea, Thailand, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Cambodia and Nepal.³⁶

Children are trafficked into India from Nepal and Bangladesh, and it is reported that children from Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka are brought into Pakistan. Approximately 200-400 young Bangladeshi women and children are smuggled every month into Pakistan according to human rights activists. Young girls are being kidnapped in Nepal and shipped across the border to India; the Government of Nepal has reported that there are 200,000 Nepalese women and girls in India's brothels.³⁷ In Thailand, victims have been abducted and brought to Myanmar, China, India and other countries.

Vietnam and Cambodia have serious problems of child prostitution and trafficking, and Sri Lanka's sex industry has seen an explosive growth in recent years.³⁸

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, prostitution in the U.S. is growing dramatically among young people; the problem of teenage prostitution is particularly acute. In Europe, trafficking is increasing rapidly, and the ages of the women and girls involved are decreasing. The problem is particularly severe in the East European countries; Defense for Children International has reported an alarming growth of prostitution among Russian, Polish, Romanian, Hungarian and Czech children. Trafficking routes are extending and there is evidence to suggest that children are trafficked across continents and into the sex industries of industrialized countries such as Japan, Australia and throughout Scandinavia. ³⁹

In Africa, many countries are faced with a rising child prostitution problem and the linkage with tourism is evident. Algeria has been reported as a place of transit for traffickers, and Senegal, Kenya, Sudan and Libya are on the list of countries where child prostitution is increasing. Visible increases of children in prostitution are noted in Ghana, Cote d'Ivoire and Burkina Faso.

In Central and South America, there are large numbers of street children and the link between that and prostitution is strong. Child victims of sexual exploitation are present in large numbers in Nicaragua, Venezuela, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and Peru. In Brazil, UNICEF estimates that the number of prostituted children exceeds 500,000. The average age is 13-17, but there are cases of children as young as six documented in Brazil.⁴⁰ Concerns have been raised regarding the visible increase in child sex workers in Honduras, El Salvador, Mexico, Costa Rica, Panama, Guatemala and Argentina.

International Efforts

The international community is paying increased attention to the commercial sexual exploitation of children, and transnational and international governing bodies are involved in combating the problem.⁴¹ International conventions treat child prostitution as an unacceptable form of forced labor; the aim is to eradicate the practices and to find the right strategies to prevent problems from occurring in the first place. A number of initiatives have been taken to protect the human rights of children, specifically ending prostitution, preventing gender discrimination, and providing children with rights. There is growing international acceptance of the need for more effective action and strengthened law enforcement in the countries of destination to which sex offenders come.⁴² Extra-territoriality laws on the part of the countries of origin are being implemented to penalize the conduct of their nationals who commit crimes against children in other countries.⁴³ In most cases, in both international and national law, the legal stance is that the sale and trafficking in children, child prostitution and the sexual exploitation of children, pedophilia and child pornography are all violent crimes against children and are treated as such.⁴⁴ How effectively these duties are carried out depends on the extent to which the society regards the protection of children as important; the legal environment reflects the political environment, and unless a society gives priority to the protection of its children, the laws will not protect them.⁴⁵ In reality, child victims are offered little or no protection as many laws suffer from lax or weak enforcement. The child victim is commonly penalized, while there are few consequences for the offender. Non-governmental organizations have been instrumental in broadening international dialogue and expanding consensus for greater action. The International Labor Organization (ILO) and the United Nations have been at the forefront in the development of instruments to prevent child exploitation and forced labor. In 1959, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Child proclaimed that "the child shall be protected against all forms of neglect, cruelty and exploitation. The child shall not be subject to traffic in any form." The most significant development with regard to protection of children is the establishment of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989, outlining children's human rights in civil, political, economic and cultural terms - the child's right to survival and development.⁴⁶

Article 34 of the Convention states that "the child has the right to be protected from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. State Parties should take all appropriate measures to prevent the inducement or coercion of a child to engage in any unlawful sexual activity, the exploitation and use of children in prostitution or other unlawful practices, and the exploitative use of children in pornographic performances and materials". It requires that the laws in each country adopting the Convention must see children as the subjects of rights, not as commodities. Implementation of the Convention at the national level has been weak, however, due to inadequate law enforcement.⁴⁷ Moreover, attention to children's rights in particular and human rights in general is limited in many countries.

Prior to the founding of the United Nations, a number of treaties were adopted in an effort to combat forced labor, trafficking, financial gains from the prostitution of others, and other forms of exploitation.⁴⁸ Many recent international treaties, instruments and laws include direct references to the exploitation of children; others specify the obligations on the part of the State with regard to the treatment of children living in difficult circumstances (Annex 1). Further developments in international law are likely with the objective to create a binding instrument which bans the most intolerable forms of child labor, such as sexual exploitation of children. ⁴⁹

The World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, which took place in Sweden in 1996 was the first attempt to co-ordinate international co-operation and to draw international attention to the problem. The Declaration and Agenda for Action calls for full implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. It was stated that "there is and can be no issue of choice, free will or self-determination in a situation of sexual exploitation, precisely because sexual exploitation is a suppression of choice, eradication of free will and decimation of self-determination". ⁵⁰

Summary of Recommendations

There is an urgent need for effective global action, strengthened law enforcement and law reform dealing with the commercial sexual exploitation of children.⁵¹ Appropriate, accessible, culturally appropriate, gender-sensitive services, including legal, social, medical, psychological and other support measures are essential. Psychological, social and medical interventions as well as long-term monitoring may be needed to treat the sex exploiter.⁵² Recommendations by the international community focus on, but are not limited to, the following:

- strengthened multi-level international cooperation and collaboration between government and non-government sectors;
- improved protection of children and their rights, and awareness raising of children's rights;
- strengthened public information campaigns to target the demand side, the sex exploiters;
- strengthen and implement extraterritorial criminal laws, extradition and other measures to prosecute the sex exploiter of children, criminalize child pornography, including its possession, and register sex offenders;
- ensure effective law enforcement in both countries of origin and destination, and facilitate the gathering of evidence, detection and prosecution of sex exploiters by fostering cooperation between countries;
- allocate adequate resources and capacity-building for preventive action against sexual exploitation of children;
- increase access to basic education, particularly with regard to the plight of the girl child and the inferior status assigned to women and children in many communities;
- conduct information campaigns on human sexuality and reproductive health;
- provide comprehensive services to support child victims and their families, and protect child victims from being penalized; and

- develop alternative means of livelihood for child victims and their families to prevent further commercial sexual exploitation.

Conclusion

The commercial sexual exploitation of children involves coercion and violence, forced labor and is a contemporary form of slavery.⁵³ Inadequate institutional mechanisms to promote children's rights, or lack thereof, are predisposing factors in exposing children to various forms of exploitation. Oppressive aspects of tradition, societal assumptions about gender, sexuality, the need to police a woman's sexuality, and the low value placed on women and girls put young girls in a particularly vulnerable position.

The problem of children involved in the sex sector is described in many countries as a problem imported from other cultures, sometimes in an attempt to take away attention from domestic policies and the root causes of poverty, marginalization and the indifference to the welfare of children. It is, however, the poor who are most vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Moreover, the poor are not only defined in terms of lack of access to employment, goods and services, but also more specifically through their lack of access to power.⁵⁴ In this hierarchy, in both developed and developing countries, children are on the bottom.

The economic and social bases for prostitution remain strong in many developing countries. Although absolute poverty has declined, social safety nets are still largely absent, income inequalities remain wide, and child protection mechanisms are ineffective or non-existent. Sexually exploited children frequently fall outside the social welfare net. It is crucial that legislators and policymakers adopt a clear position on children in the sex sector.⁵⁵ A major hurdle is that "they have shied away from directly dealing with it as an economic sector, and coherent and effective government policies and programs targeting the business are lacking".⁵⁶

In view of the differences between child prostitution and adult prostitution, separate measures for each, rather than a single policy stance, are recommended. Child sex workers should be treated as a much more serious problem than adults because children are clearly more vulnerable and helpless against the established structures and vested interests in the sex sector, and much more likely to be victims of debt bondage. There are few doubts that the sexual exploitation of children results in serious, often life-long or life-threatening consequences for physical, psychological, and social development, including the threat of early pregnancy, maternal mortality, injury, retarded development, physical disabilities and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.⁵⁸ At the community level, the commercial sexual exploitation of children represents an erosion of human values and rights. When children lack a healthy environment, access to health care, education and recreation, and minimum standards of food, clothing and shelter, they become particularly vulnerable to exploitation. The Convention on the Rights of the Child reaffirms that people under the age of 18 are entitled to full protection from all forms of commercial exploitation by adults. The commercial sexual exploitation of children is a fundamental violation of children's rights - the goal is to eradicate these practices and to ensure that children are given equal human rights.⁵⁹

Annex 1

International Treaties, Laws and Instruments

United Nations Treaties

1923 Convention for the Suppression of the Circulation of, and Traffic in, Obscene Publications (amended in 1947)

1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others
1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery
1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child
1992 UN Programme of Action on the Prevention of the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography
1993 Elimination of Violence Against Women

ILO Instruments

ILO Conventions 29 (Forced Labour, 1930) and 105 (Abolition of Forced Labour, 1957)
ILO Conventions 138 (Minimum Age, 1973) and Recommendation 146 (Minimum Age, 1973)

Refugee Law

1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees
Executive Committee of the High Commissioner's Programme: Conclusion No. 47 of 1987 on Refugee Children

International Humanitarian Law

Regulations Regarding the Laws and Customs of War on Land Annexed to the 1907 Hague Convention IV
Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflicts (Protocol I)
Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II)
Revised Hague Convention on the Protection of Children

Notes

The author, Maj-Lis Voss, has worked at the World Bank since 1994, primarily on health, nutrition and population in South Asia. Her other interests include children's rights and child health.

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