

CHILDREN SEXUAL EXPLOITED IN CENTRAL AMERICA

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“I oppose the sexual exploitation of children and view with concern the growing incidence of this practice. These illegal practices must be prosecuted and criminalized and children must be protected”

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is an age old problem in Central America region. In some countries it has existed for centuries, embedded in historical and cultural practices. However, the increasing of sexual exploitation of children began to attract public attention in the mid 1990s, when some highly publicized cases drew regional attention to the way in which children were being sexual exploited in what was described as a **“modern form of slavery”** and as **“the most severe form of violation of children’s fundamental rights to survival, dignity and healthy human development”**.

The CSEC is a national problem but at the same time it is a borderless phenomenon. It is a regional and inter-regional phenomenon, affecting all countries of the area (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama), although the extent of the problem varies per country.¹

The commercial sexual exploitation and child pornography are carried out through sex trafficking and sex tourism. Child sex trafficking is when a young person has been kidnapped, recruited, transported, transferred, across borders for sexual purposes, coerced into the sex trade or sold as sex slaves.²

In Central America region most victims of sexual exploitation are trafficked from Honduras and El Salvador to Guatemala, from Nicaragua to Costa Rica and from Guatemala to El Salvador.³

Recent studies by both inter-governmental agencies and non-governmental organizations suggest that thousands of Central American children are being exploited for sexual purposes. There are common factors in the region that explain this social phenomenon, such as the high level of violence. This violence is a vestige of the armed conflicts that these countries lived during the last three decades of the twenty century. The violence compounded by sheer poverty is often reproduced at home and in the community. Women and

¹ Second World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, Yokohama, Japan, December 2001

² Palermo Protocol against the Trafficking of Children, United Nations, 2003

³ Maria Eugenia Villarreal, Investigation on the Trafficking, Sex Tourism, Pornography and Prostitution of Children in Central America and Mexico, ECPAT/International, Casa Alianza, Audrey Hepburn Children’s Fund, Costa Rica, 2001

children being the most vulnerable targets, particularly in the lower strata of society.

Other common factors are the environment/root causes that are found in the backgrounds of most such children, such as poverty, extreme poverty, exclusion, inequality, marginalization and discrimination. The economic status of the family determines how children are treated socially and culturally.

The Central America societies are patriarchal, is another common factor. This patriarchal belt establishes that men have the power and control at social and family level. They take the decisions about the female members of their families, the daughters are not being considered as persons with all their rights and as social subjects.

Furthermore, there are a number of underlying factors which have been identified such as the highly stereotypical role models for boys and girls presented in Central America via educational texts and advertising. This issue plays an important role in socializing young girls into the idea that they are weak and inferior, both physically and intellectually compared to boys, and that their function in society is to serve. The socialization extends to acceptance of the idea that men and women express their sexuality differently. Men are considered sexually active, women as passive. Therefore that by so defining the very "nature" of women, society explains why some have remunerated sexual relations and some not. Macho culture determines that "decent" women are mothers and wives, the others should serve men so that males can give rein to their sexuality. Thus is the existence and role of sexual exploited girls rationalized and validated. The negative traditional practices and myths must also be considered to explain this phenomenon.

In general the profile of the girls sexual exploited have a low or even non-existent level of education. Amongst the most common reasons given for having abandoned their studies are the lack of resources of the nuclear family, physical punishment inflicted by parents and teachers and the belief that they didn't have the ability to benefit from school.

They come from dysfunction families or from large one parent families, usually headed by single mothers because in many cases the father abandoned the

family. Their parents would have had little education, no qualifications and limited financial resources.

A research has shown that 55 to 90 percent of girls sexual exploited were sexually abused as children, and many of them forced out of the family home or abandoned.⁴ Families often reject under-age single mothers.

The vulnerabilities are also further rooted in the age, class, ethnicity and gender discrimination of children, making them more susceptible to being sexual exploited.

Other factors, such as insecurity, emotional abandonment, neglect, generational conflict, absence of guidance, the necessity for personal and family survival, physical violence, are also factors which drove these young Central Americans girls from their homes into sexual exploitation.

The majority of these girls first entered the labor market as domestic workers, waitresses, cashiers, dancers, bar maids, street salespersons, agricultural, maquila (clothing assembly) or factory workers. Others survived through theft and begging, all high risk situations.

They also generally shared a number of other characteristics including the circumstances of their first sexual relations, economic problems and the restraints and discrimination faced in a patriarchal culture. These in turn led to low self-esteem, insecurity and rejection by the family.

Some of the girls are influenced by friends, generally, these are women already engaged in prostitution, who introduced the girls into sexual exploitation.

As more information comes to light, it becomes tragically clear that the CSEC is devastating for child victims, because these children are exposed daily to physical, emotional and mental abuse; they suffer psychological trauma and post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). This PTSD is a psychological reaction to extreme physical and emotional trauma. The symptoms are acute anxiety,

⁴ Melissa Farley, "Research shows harm that prostitution does to emocional health". San Francisco Examiner, P.6 San Francisco, USA 2002.

depression, insomnia, irritability, flashbacks, emotional numbing and being in a state of emotional hyper-alert.

They are in high risk to get sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS, and they have a higher rate of adolescent pregnancy than their peers not sexual exploited. Besides, they are exposed to consume drugs and alcohol in part, because they are obliged to do it and/or because they want to minimize the awareness of the consequences of the life they must endure.

The pimps played an important role in this phenomenon, they taught them to trade, put them in touch with "clients", and then lived from their earnings, in many cases providing them with drugs and promoting their addiction in order to heighten the girl's dependency on the drugs and alcohol.

In Central American countries, sexual exploitation of children is **illegal** but it is "**hidden**" because is deeply seated a social permissiveness of these phenomena. Some studies argue that there are many motives for hiding reality, perhaps from fear or from the conviction that it is impossible to have an alternative to this situation, society accepts it, assimilates it and accepts it as part of its dark side....

Young children and adolescents are highly desirable sexual commodities; clients will pay higher prices to brothels owners or pimps to get access to them. Studies have shown that at least 35% of sexual exploited girls found in brothels have less that 18 year of age,⁵

Girls and adolescents may prostitute themselves for the economic returns the activities provide. The levels of income achieved in short periods by these young girls far exceed any other form of activity that may be found in their environment.

CSEC has recently been documented in the Central American region. It is estimated that **approximately more than thirty thousand children may be involved or at risk to be involved in sexual exploitation, in the region.**⁶

⁵ Cuarto informe sobre la Implementación de la Agenda de Acción como Seguimiento al Congreso Mundial contra la Explotación Sexual Comercial de la niñez, Suecia, 1996

⁶ Maria Eugenia Villarreal, Investigation on the Trafficking, Sex Tourism, Pornography and Prostitution of Children in Central America and Mexico, ECPAT/International, Casa Alianza, Audrey Hepburn Children's Fund, Costa Rica, 2001

The nets of sexual exploiters recruit children when they are, on average, of 13 years old.

There is a diversity of exploiters to be identified. The notion of exploiter encompasses not only the pimp, the procurer, the industry, the owners of bars and brothels, the negligent authorities, but also the client of CSEC and the whole system that fails to respond to child protection.

Other important factor is the DEMAND for CSEC; this factor goes hand in hand with the supply factor. The demand is a predominant concern because it is interlinked with the pattern of male behavior, because the majority of cases of CSEC it is men who perpetrate the crimes against children. This does not neglect the fact that women are also at times involved with exploiting children for sex, but a major concern is address the issue of the demand factor and the role of males in relation to CSEC.⁷

The demand factor is the critical part of the equation in the sex trafficking of children and youth, the supplier justifies his or her actions because of the demand and the fact that clients are willing to pay money for the service.⁸

The demand for sex with children appears to be growing. This is caused by a combination of increasing tourism and fear of AIDS from adult sex workers.

Male behaviour is intrinsically linked with the educational and socialisation process, where regrettably the knowledge base, attitudes and behaviour are not adequately nurtured to respect the rights of children.

Although in many situations boys are the victims, it is the girl children who are the vast caseload of the sexually exploited.

It is recognised by a background document that "There is no sex exploiter" as such. Instead, there are people (adult and child, male and female) who sexually exploit children in many different ways, for many different reasons and in many different social contexts⁹

⁷ Second World Congress Against Sexual Exploitation of Children Report, Yokohama, Japan, December 2001

⁸ Ibidem

⁹ Report of the Second World Congress Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, Yokohama, Japan, 17-20 December 2001

Other factor that must be considered is that in Central America countries children are not adequately protected from sexual exploitation, even though they have signed and ratified the following key instrument that provides protection to the child victims:

- The Convention on the Rights of the Child is the main frame of reference for the promotion and protection of the rights of children
- the Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography
- The International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labor, which includes trafficking of children.
- The UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime
- It's Protocol "Trafficking in Persons - Especially Women and Children".

Their national legislations (with the exemption of Costa Rica), do not adequately criminalize and penalized the sexual exploiters in very few cases is the criminal arrested.

In Central America legislation, there are judicial stipulations and measures to protect minors against sexual exploitation and abuse. Such provisions are included in codes typically bearing such titles as "Crimes against modesty" or "Offences against sexual freedom and Honesty" and include "Judicial provisions related to the corruption of minors, prostitution and pimping" and the trafficking of persons for sexual exploitation". However, the sanctions against sexual exploitation are generally very weak throughout Central America, a situation which rather than helping the diminish the phenomenon appears to facilitate it.

Other factors are the inefficiency, corruption and impunity of some customs, policemen and governmental authorities, the lack of mechanisms and institutional procedures in the national police for the effective persecution of exploiters and offenders and the lack of extraterritorial legislation and agreements between countries to fight the trafficking of children

The sex trafficking is a complex issue requiring innovative and integrated responses among each country of the region. Any interventions to prevent and to protect the victims must be based on governmental commitments of needed

measures and more cooperation between Central America states and other partners to:

- Accord higher priority to action against CSEC with adequate resources
- Promote stronger cooperation between States and all sectors of society and strengthen families against CSEC
- Enforce laws, policies and programmes against CSEC and strengthen communication and cooperation between law enforcement and authorities.
- Comprehensive laws addressing the issue of trafficking
- Extradition treaties and bilateral agreements to facilitate prosecution of traffickers
- Speedy delivery of justice
- Court procedures to be made victim/child-friendly
- Coordinated response from the various law enforcement agencies
- Victim's protection to be addressed
- Decriminalization in relation to the child victim
- Provision of social welfare facilities to help the child victims rather than placing them in detention
- Restorative justice and compensation for the child victims
- Protection of witnesses
- Training and capacity-building of law enforcers to help children
- Cross-border and in-country cooperation between government officials, NGOs, the private sector and members of civil society.

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