

# profiting from abuse



**An investigation into the sexual exploitation of our children**

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Throughout this publication, the names of children have been changed to protect their identity.

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Note: All dollars are US dollars.

# Table of Contents

Foreword .....	ii
<i>by Carol Bellamy, UNICEF Executive Director</i>	
Introduction: Tales of betrayal, cruelty and greed .....	1
Getting our act together: A President’s campaign against the sexual exploitation of children .....	4
<i>by Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, President of the Philippines</i>	
Bought and sold 12 times (from Nigeria to Italy).....	8
<i>by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin</i>	
Trafficking: Legislative responses .....	12
<i>by Pamela Shifman and Ken Franzblau of Equality Now</i>	
Albania’s trafficked children: Begging for a better life .....	18
A village network fights back (Cambodia) .....	24
SOLWODI: Giving girls a second chance (Kenya) .....	28
Dominican Republic: First but necessary steps .....	34
<b>Boxes:</b>	
The exploiters .....	6
Commercial sexual exploitation: Facts and figures .....	7
What about boys? .....	11
Partnerships: A unified response .....	14
Early marriage: A harmful tradition.....	15
Fuelling the supply .....	17
Debunking the myths .....	20
Reaching the community in Cambodia .....	27
Impact of armed conflict on the sexual exploitation of children .....	31
Sexual abuse: A shameful secret .....	32
CyberTipline targets child sexual exploitation .....	33
Breaking the cycle .....	37
Signs of progress .....	39

# Foreword

UNICEF/93.1893



**I**t is hard to imagine a more difficult and shocking obstacle to the realization of human rights than the commercial sexual trafficking of children. Yet trafficking is only one element of the even more pervasive and deeply rooted problem of sexual abuse.

Children who are sexually abused find their world turned upside down. Because it can occur at the hands of a close relative or friend, sexual abuse makes enemies out of the very people children look to for protection – those they know, love and trust. And because it can happen where children live, learn and play, familiar places like home or school can become forbidding and dangerous.

At the same time, millions of children throughout the world are exploited for commercial sex. Bought and sold like chattel, trafficked within and across borders, thrown into such situations as forced marriage, prostitution and child pornography, many suffer profound and sometimes permanent damage. Normal physical and emotional development is compromised. Self-esteem and confidence are undermined.

The desperate vulnerability of such children is only heightened by endemic factors like violence, drugs and sexually transmitted diseases. The vast majority are also denied their right to education – and even to the briefest moments of leisure and play. Because they are fearful of further abuse, including abuse by the authorities, such children typically have little recourse to the law. And those who return home may find themselves stigmatized by their own families and communities.

Five years ago in Stockholm, countries represented at the first World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children sent a clear and unequivocal message: These shameful abuses of child rights, so long a dirty secret, must not be allowed to continue.

Governments and civil society affirmed in Stockholm that children, like all human beings, are not property to be bought and sold; that their rights are to be regarded with utmost seriousness; and that their voices must be heard in the fulfilment of those rights.

At the same time, the Stockholm Congress acknowledged that there is no single solution, but many – and that each must be tailored to the diverse national, local and cultural realities in which the exploitation and abuse of children originate. And worldwide, there is a growing appreciation of something else: that all solutions must begin with the understanding that these affronts to child rights are utterly intolerable.

Zero tolerance means ending the trafficking of children, their sale and barter and imprisonment and torture. It means stamping out every horrible facet of the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Under the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child, ratified by 191 countries, children have the right to be protected against all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. In October 2001, the world took another step towards upholding that right globally with the tenth ratification of the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. That ratification means the Protocol will become a legally binding instrument in January 2002, and States Parties will be obliged to enact laws based on its standards. The first 10 countries to ratify this treaty – Andorra, Bangladesh, Cuba, Iceland, Kazakhstan, Morocco, Norway, Panama, Romania and Sierra Leone – deserve credit for moving to protect their children and for setting an example for other countries.

Credit also goes to all those organizations and individuals who are fighting child trafficking and abuse, many of them participants in the Second World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (Yokohama, Japan). The cooperation and collaboration of many partners have gone into making the Congress possible, including the co-organizers: the Government of Japan, ECPAT International and the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child. As the fourth co-organizer, UNICEF also recognizes the support of the Government of Sweden, the European Union and the Japan Committee for UNICEF.

The global movement that produced the Convention on the Rights of the Child has helped generate pressure to protect the rights of all children, including those affected by war and other forms of violence; children performing hazardous or exploitative labour; children in extreme poverty; and indigenous and disabled children.

Now it is up to all of us – including governments, law enforcement, international organizations and all levels of civil society – to see to it that the elimination of sexual exploitation and abuse is accorded the same sustained priority, with national actions to match. The world's children are entitled to no less.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "C-Bellamy".

Carol Bellamy  
Executive Director  
United Nations Children's Fund

# Introduction

## Tales of betrayal, cruelty and greed

**T**welve-year-old Rachel had just dropped out of school in Albania and was working in a cigarette factory when Stephan, age 29, asked her to marry him. When he suggested they move abroad to have a better life, Rachel believed that her new husband would love and care for her.

Three months after their wedding, Stephan persuaded Rachel to travel to Italy with him. Soon after they arrived, Stephan asked Rachel to work on the street as a prostitute. “I worked morning to night every day,” says Rachel. She worked on a highway and had to earn \$250 per night, requiring her to see about 10 clients. “If I didn’t earn that money, he would beat me,” she says.

Rachel’s story is but one of the many terrible tales of betrayal, cruelty and greed that are surfacing around the world. From the brothels of Bangkok to the sidewalks of Manila, the train stations of Moscow to the truck routes of Tanzania, the suburbs of New York to the beaches of Mexico, the outrageous is commonplace. Girls and boys are bought and sold like commodities and sexually exploited for commercial gain.

The sex trade is a multibillion-dollar industry, built on greed and feeding on those with the least power. Children are coldly and calculatedly targeted for their marketability and cash value. In many countries, the sex industry fuels the expansion of the tourist industry and is a significant source of foreign exchange earnings. A study on the illegal economy in Thailand, for example, found that from 1993 to 1995, prostitution accounted for 10 per cent to 14 per cent of the country’s annual gross domestic product (GDP). An estimated one third of the women involved in prostitution in Thailand are minors.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children assumes many forms and has many faces. Children are enslaved by a chain of actors, all of whom profit in some way. The chain can be long, linking a child to an abuser sometimes thousands of miles away through intermediaries that include recruiters, transporters, brothel owners and pimps. Organized criminal networks and gangs thrive on this trade in children and, to lesser or greater degrees, so do many others: hotel clerks, taxi drivers, police officers, government officials, neighbours and relatives, including mothers and fathers. Some are actively involved – luring, tricking, coercing, abducting, kidnapping and selling. Some permit the crimes by looking the other way. How such exploitation can continue is almost incomprehensible, even given the enormous profits involved.

This report, a tribute to the courage of the many children who have been affected by this inhuman trade, presents the moving words of the children themselves, as well as the passionate and informed opinions of distinguished personalities and authorities. Part of the growing chorus of committed and outspoken people coalescing around this burning subject, they speak of the measures needed to counter it, as well as their commitments to ending it. Leadership is a recurrent theme. The new legislative measures that are helping protect children are described, as are the courage and dedication of those working on the front lines to stop this form of violence against children.

- ◆ **President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo of the Philippines writes with passion about the horror she feels in response to this brutal trade in children and about her unequivocal commitment to fighting the sexual abuse and exploitation of children. She describes the national and local initiatives in place in the Philippines to stop the sexual exploitation of children and calls for collective action by both the government and private sector to help solve the problem.**
- ◆ **Archbishop Diarmuid Martin, the Holy See’s Permanent Observer to the United Nations Office in Geneva, writes a poignant essay about a priest’s efforts to help young women who have been trafficked to Italy from Nigeria. He conveys the complexity of the problem as well as the incredible resolve of those combating it.**
- ◆ **In another informative essay, two leading authorities discuss the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, a comprehensive bill introduced in the United States in October 2000, designed to help federal law-enforcement officials track down and prosecute traffickers. Pamela Shifman and Ken Franzblau of Equality Now also explain, through other country examples, how vital comprehensive legislation is. Without it, governments have only limited means of punishing traffickers, protecting victims and preventing further victimization.**
- ◆ **This publication also conveys the words and experiences of young people, how they become involved in the sex trade, how they feel about their lives, what they need, what they fear and what they hope for.**
- ◆ **A piece on trafficking describes the lives of youngsters such as Michael, who was taken from Albania to beg on the streets of Greece when he was five years old. In his words, “I must work to make money for my mother.” The article explains how, with UNICEF support, two non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are helping children who have been trafficked to Greece reintegrate into schools in four Albanian cities.**
- ◆ **An NGO in Kenya uses peer educators to reach out to teenage girls who are ‘just about to enter’ or ‘in the early stages’ of commercial sex work. Individual and group counselling, vocational training, home visits and education around issues such as HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, women’s rights and how to fight for those rights, help the girls learn the skills and develop a stronger sense of self to broaden their life choices.**
- ◆ **“There are a lot of people who don’t want to eliminate the problem because it brings them money,” explains the**

Director of the National School of Judges in the Dominican Republic. There, a new criminal law is holding perpetrators accountable, and mass campaigns are educating people about the issue of family violence and the harmful effects of child abuse and sexual exploitation. This article traces the groundwork being laid but also explains that many challenges remain.

◆ Fifteen-year-old Srey Kanya was lured away from her Cambodian village with promises of a good job. “You’re too smart to be tucked away in this village,” said an older woman who came to her village to find girls. “You should be in the town working in a good job that pays a high salary. I can help you if you like.” Instead, Srey Kanya ended up in a brothel in Phnom Penh. To prevent and repair such harm, the report describes how communities in Cambodia have established Community-Based Child Protection Networks, which educate villagers about trafficking and other potential dangers facing their children.



What emerges in these pages is a sense of the complexity and scale of the problem and the multiple elements that fuel both the supply and the demand for children. Sexual abuse places children at heightened risk of being drawn into the sex trade; poverty, gender discrimination, family breakdown, conflict and political instability create situations in which children, especially girls, are more easily victimized.

The most effective responses to the abuse take into account specific local and regional factors, and include an understanding of the different ways in which children are exploited, the places where children are exploited, the methods used to recruit them and the procedures used to retain them.

An incontrovertible conclusion also emerges: Education is vital. It empowers children so that they can protect themselves from abuse and also gives them the skills to change and improve their lives. In its broadest sense, education is key to uprooting sexual abuse and the exploitation of children. Schools must educate children to recognize and avoid high-risk situations. In addition, societies must become open to recognizing and taking action against the exploitation of their children. In Albania, parents are learning about the dangers facing their children who are trafficked to neighbouring countries. In the Dominican Republic, judges are learning about the issue of family violence and the importance of enforcing the new legislation that prescribes penalties for violence against women, family abuse, sexual assaults, procuring and trafficking in women and desertion of the family. In Kenya, teenage girls are learning income-generating skills as well as how to protect and respect themselves. In Cambodia, entire communities – parents, police officers, teachers and health care personnel – are understanding the consequences of sexual abuse and the effects of all forms of violence against children.

Education and awareness-raising bring sexual abuse and exploitation of children out of the shadows. They uncover the many facets of the problem, including the attitudes that allow the sexual abuse of children to take place, and help create a culture that refuses to accept any form of violence against children.

The forces that perpetuate the sexual abuse and exploitation of children are many and powerful: organized crime, poverty and social disintegration, greed, traditions and beliefs, shame, denial and the growing drug trade.

Confronting these forces calls for unwavering and committed leadership. It requires laws that promote children’s welfare and protect them from abuse. It demands the conscientious enforcement of those laws, as well as criminal sanctions against abusers. It requires alternatives that enable children and families to live in dignity.

The responsibility to stop the commercial sexual exploitation of children belongs to everyone, in every community. Around the world, a growing movement composed of outraged and committed people is determined to end this abuse. ▼

# Getting our act together

## A President's campaign against the sexual exploitation of children

By the President of the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal Arroyo



**I** remember how Marife, eight years old, trembled at the sight of her stepfather during a confrontation inside the courtroom. It took a number of therapy sessions before she could muster enough courage and support from the social worker to point to the perpetrator.

As the mother of a daughter who was sexually harassed, I can imagine the horror and the agony of Marife during those terrifying moments when she was repeatedly raped and later on sold by her unemployed stepfather. Marife's sad story continues in a number of homes. In fact, many young Filipino children are sexually assaulted and in some instances sold like merchandise to paedophiles.

My heart bleeds at the sight of a traumatized child. This exploitation cannot go on. For as long as I am President, the campaign against child sexual exploitation must be waged vigorously at all costs, and measures taken must be linked to the overall national agenda. Poverty must be redressed. Material impoverishment as well as moral depravation must be confronted and effectively controlled.

Child victims are initiated into the sex trade between the ages of 10 and 18 years, some through the influence of peers, others through deception or force. In 1986, it was estimated that there were 20,000 children in the Philippines involved in the sex trade; in 2000, the estimate rose to 100,000.

The effects of sexual exploitation on children can be irreparable. Their traumatic experiences give them a distorted sense of values and a negative outlook towards people and life in general. They may have low self-esteem, feel inadequate and mistrust others. Their families and communities may ostracize them. These children are also highly vulnerable to substance abuse, physical violence, sexually transmitted infections, HIV/AIDS and early pregnancy.

A number of factors contribute to the growing incidence of the commercial and sexual exploitation of children, including poverty, family breakdown, gender discrimination, consumerism, tourism, lack of political will and weak enforcement of laws.

In the Philippines, we are implementing a strategic multisectoral initiative on the problem and have enlisted and mobilized the support of a number of organizations working in the areas of protection, recovery and reintegration. Five critical

“I left home when I was nine. I lived in Otay. They [other boys] invited me to take drugs and at first I didn’t want to but then I wanted to see what it felt like. I slept in the streets. I lay down anywhere. I’m 14 now and I’ve got to like being in the street...some clients come and look for us when we’re in the centre playing on the machines... that’s where the people go to find us. If you like the price, you go, if not, you don’t.... Some offer you 10 dollars to go to their homes, but you say 30 or it’s not on....”

– 14-year-old boy from Tijuana, Mexico

(From *Stolen Childhood: Girl and Boy Victims of Sexual Exploitation in Mexico*, UNICEF Mexico, p. 129)

points guide our interventions: (1) the child has fundamental rights; (2) the commercial and sexual exploitation of children is a complex problem that involves individuals, families, communities, formal groups, organizations and societal institutions; (3) a strategic plan is needed to address the social phenomenon; (4) interventions should be multisectoral, converging and integrated and should include prevention, protection, recovery and reintegration, coordination and cooperation and child participation; and (5) implementation should be carried out at all levels including the *barangay* (village).

We are waging war against the commercial and sexual exploitation of children by providing unwavering leadership and direction to the executive departments that are united in the campaign. This explains why there are elaborate programmes and activities in the countryside and especially in the major urban centres of the country. It is significant to note that, at the ground level, social workers take the lead role in case management, therapy and in collaborating with other disciplines.

In Cebu, two centres reach out to the community. The Centre for Women and Children acts as a crisis intervention and residential health care unit for abused women and children. Also, the Special Social Service Office employs social workers who serve as field workers in extending the programmes and services to communities in different districts in Cebu province.

In Davao, we reach out to sexually abused children through institutions such as the Maa Group Home for Girls, located at Maa, Davao City, and the Special Social Service Unit that works in communities and handles walk-in clients. The Group Home for Girls serves as a crisis intervention centre and provides temporary residential care for abused children, while the Special Social Service Unit deploys social workers to communities. The Rape, Incest, Child Abuse and Violence against Women Network advocates for the prevention of all forms of abuse and violence against women and children. There is also a group called Volunteer Paralegal, composed of *barangay* officials and volunteers who help advocate against and report on child abuse. The city government has also established its own crisis intervention centre for abused children, the *Balay Dangupan*, which provides psychosocial interventions to sexually abused children.

In three major urban areas we have also established centres to help sexually abused children overcome their trauma and to build their self-respect and self-confidence in a child-friendly atmosphere.

According to our Council for the Welfare of Children, there are strategic gains, but such efforts need to be translated into specialized measures to cater to the needs and situations of children involved in and/or at risk of commercial sexual exploitation.

In working to solve the grave problem of the commercial sexual exploitation of children, we have experienced the indifference of families, communities and the public to the needs of the children; lack of political will (intervention of influential people, politicians, police officers and judges); weak enforcement of laws and slow disposition of cases; fragmented rather than complementary and convergent approaches to programming; lack of resources (money, facilities and staff); lack of protection for service providers handling cases of commercial sexual exploitation of children; inadequate professional preparation among service providers; lack of coordination between and among agencies; lack of an effective system for monitoring and evaluation; and little or no data on the issue.

Our mission is far from complete and much remains to be done. Concerted action is needed to make a dramatic impact on the problem.

It is imperative that the continuing efforts of the following forces be fully harnessed, maximized and sustained: strong political will; responsive organizations and institutions; critical engagement of the mass media; committed professional social workers; and a capable management and support system.

My leadership is at stake. I am accountable if my administration fails to protect the rights of children and promote their welfare and well-being. This is why, as President, I am fully committed to eradicating this social malaise.

We have to move and act swiftly. There is no room for delay.

The problem of the commercial and sexual exploitation of children in our country deserves our serious attention and it requires collective action by both government and the private sector. We owe it to our children. Let us save them from perpetrators. Let us give them a secure and bright future. ▼

## THE EXPLOITERS

There is no typical profile of those who sexually exploit children – no simple categories within which these people fall. An exploiter may prefer adult sexual partners, but may, out of stress, convenience or curiosity, engage in sexual activity with children. Some exploiters may be paedophiles – adults who are sexually attracted only to children and who will do anything necessary to fulfil their own needs. Those who have easy access to children, whether in extended families or as authority figures in homes or communities, may abuse children. Some studies

indicate that the effects of the abuse on the children may contribute to their entry into commercial sexual exploitation.

Many adults who engage in sexual exploitation of children do not consider their actions to be abusive. Sexual abusers use a number of excuses to deceive themselves into thinking that their behaviour is acceptable. They tell themselves:

- that child prostitutes who approach them have actively chosen prostitution;
- that the cultures in tourist destinations are sexually more 'natural' and freer than western societies. Girls in these countries are 'grown up' and 'sexually experienced' at a

very young age, so there's nothing wrong with it;

- that no harm can result from having sex with the child since the child is already a prostitute;
- that child prostitutes, especially in non-industrialized countries, desperately need money, so they are actually doing these children a favour.

There is no excuse for the sexual exploitation of children, which is an imbalance and abuse of power and a grievous wrong. Children – all those under the age of 18, as defined by the Convention on the Rights of the Child – are among the most vulnerable members of society – and their right to freedom from such abuse is inalienable.

# COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION: Facts and figures

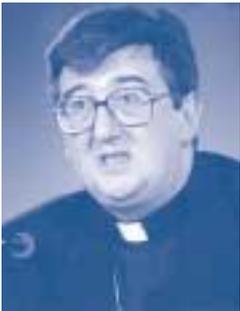
*Because the commercial sexual exploitation of children is largely hidden, accurate data on its occurrence is difficult to collect. When surveys do exist, definitions of child prostitution and sexual exploitation vary. Some estimates include street children who may sell sex if someone makes an offer; others include children working only in brothels or massage parlours, where many are kept in a state indistinguishable from slavery. Even though incomplete, the data show a serious problem.*

- In Lithuania, 20 to 50 per cent of prostitutes are believed to be minors. Children as young as age 11 are known to work as brothel prostitutes, and children from children's homes, some 10 to 12 years old, have been used to make pornographic movies.
- In Cambodia, in a Human Rights Vigilance survey of 6,110 sex workers in the city of Phnom Penh and in 11 provinces, 31 per cent of those interviewed were children aged 12 to 17.
- Debt bondage is often the way girls enter prostitution in many Asian countries, including India, Myanmar, Nepal, Pakistan and Thailand. The girl must work off the money given to parents or a guardian and cannot leave prostitution until the debt is fully paid. Girls make little money, and expenses such as rent, transportation and food are added to the debt, making it extremely difficult to pay off.
- A study conducted in the United States revealed that one in five children who go online regularly are approached by strangers for sex. A separate study revealed that an estimated 104,000 children become victims of sexual abuse each year.
- In Thailand, close to \$300 million is estimated to be transferred annually from urban to rural areas by women working in the sex trade in urban areas.
- A Pakistani study found that, based only on reported cases, at least one rape incident involving a woman or child occurs on average every three hours in Pakistan.
- Research involving advanced secondary and university students in Sri Lanka revealed that 12 per cent of girls said they had experienced sexual abuse as children, and that even more boys – 20 per cent – said they had. Girls avoided divulging to the researchers their relationship to the perpetrators. Boys most often said it was a family member.
- In south-eastern Europe, women and children are often trafficked through the same routes used to smuggle drugs and arms.
- According to a survey by *India Today* magazine, there are between 400,000 and 500,000 child prostitutes in India.
- In Mexico, a study of six cities (Acapulco, Cancún, Ciudad Juarez, Guadalajara, Tapachula and Tijuana) estimates that a total of 4,600 children are sexually exploited in these cities. At the national level, some 16,000 children are believed to be exploited.
- From 1996 to 1998, girls aged 17 and under constituted approximately 40 per cent of reported rape and attempted rape victims in South Africa. Twenty per cent of young women surveyed in southern Johannesburg reported a history of sexual abuse by the age of 18.



# Bought and sold 12 times

By Archbishop Diarmuid Martin\*



**P**adre Giorgio is a stocky, tough-looking priest, dressed in jeans and a thick sweater, not the usual visitor to my rather sedate Vatican office. Yet when he begins to speak, his kindness emerges from beneath the rugged exterior. As you get to know him, you see his determination.

He called to see me at the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, a Vatican think-tank about social issues. “I think that you are the person who can help me,” he said.

His problem seemed simple. After working for many years as a missionary in Africa, he had returned to Italy and was designated to a parish in a sprawling but poor seaside area north of Naples. During the summer, it was a holiday resort, popular with families from Naples or Rome that rented apartments or small villas along a sandy beach. During the winter, the place was desolate, dominated by the world of organized crime.

One of the first groups that Padre Giorgio noted in his new parish was one that was not likely to cross the door of his church: sexually exploited girls. The area was a major centre of prostitution, and most of the prostitutes were black girls, mainly from Nigeria. In fact, many of them came from the same city.

With a kindly smile, he said to me, “We have to do something to get these girls to go back to Nigeria,” and added once again that he thought that I was the one who could help. Both of us knew that there were times when a letter from a senior Vatican official could work wonders with Church and civil authorities. I could give a little personal encouragement, but as time went on, there was very little help needed from me. Padre Giorgio knew exactly what had to be done and he was determined to do it.

Armed with an introduction on elegant Vatican notepaper, he headed off to the area of Nigeria from which the girls came. His project immediately began to appear more complex and more delicate than he had imagined. At first, no one knew anything about the matter. “Perhaps there may be a few girls who go individually,” he was told, “but please don’t try to bring shame on a whole city.” No one wished to talk. Then slowly he began to make headway. His attention was discreetly drawn to well-dressed women driving elegant cars, heading towards flashy new homes. As girls, they had gone to work in Europe and had come back very well off.

\*Archbishop Diarmuid Martin was Secretary of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace from 1994 to 2001 and is currently the Permanent Observer of the Holy See Mission to the United Nations in Geneva.

“We were walking near the Parade,” said Jenny, then 14. She was one of three girls who had run away from a girls’ reformatory and were spending the afternoon in the city centre. “We turned around to look and saw a white BMW.” Three men forced the girls into the car at gunpoint. “We stopped at a house, which was behind a factory. They said we must get out of the car.” One of the girls was initiated as a sex worker that same night. She was held captive for three months. Another girl, Lucia, escaped six days after being abducted and two days after being raped. “We were 17 people in the lounge when Faizel raped Lucia,” said Jenny. “Lucia was only 14 years old. When Faizel was done with her, another man, Ray, came to me and said that I should forget about running away because we will be staying there a very long time.” Jenny ended up becoming a sex worker. She said she was coerced and assaulted. After three months, she ran away.

*(From The Trafficking of Children for Purposes of Sexual Exploitation – South Africa, a report by Molo Songololo, 2000, pp. 54 and 57)*

But everyone knew that this was only part of the story. Most of the girls did not come back. Padre Giorgio knew that it was most unlikely that any of the girls would want to come back poor and with a sense of shame. He had hoped to get someone to open a type of halfway house to help girls return and to offer them work. But that would only identify them and expose them both to stigma and to the eyes of precisely those who had organized their departure, and who were not anxious for publicity.

Padre Giorgio returned to Rome, however, with a few new pieces of what turned out to be a complex jigsaw puzzle. He also returned to Rome with Sister Assumpta and two companions. A few days later they appeared in my office. Sister Assumpta had found herself suddenly transplanted from tropical African heat to one of those rare, bitterly cold days in Rome. Someone had given her an overcoat that was a few sizes too big. She looked utterly lost. But if Padre Giorgio was tough and determined, Sister Assumpta left him standing. She and her companions had only been in Italy for one week and they had already begun making contact with the girls. You can imagine the surprise of the girls finding someone of their own tribe and speaking their own language in the midst of their harsh world.

Sister Assumpta had already drawn up a much more detailed map of the sad situation in which the girls found themselves. They were recruited to work in Europe precisely by some of those women back home with the flashy houses and cars. The girls paid a substantial fee to their ‘managers’, and then they headed off on a long and tortuous route to Italy.

The girls were bought and sold 10 to 12 times along the route, from Nigeria, to North Africa, across Central Europe, over the border into Italy and then into the final ‘care’ of the local Mafia north of Naples. They knew how much they would have to repay before there would be any discussion of their earning anything for themselves or to send home to their families. They knew that the only way to do that would be to move ever deeper into the sordid business of trafficking and prostitution, becoming ‘madams’ themselves. Above all, they knew the risks of trying to run away. They were effectively slaves. Their lives were dominated by fear.

Any papers these girls had were forged or had been obtained illegally. The local police authorities, for the most part, did not seem to want to notice their presence, except occasionally during a holiday weekend when the Romans and the Neapolitans

returned and complained about the number of prostitutes on the streets. At those times, the police would move them on to some other area, always under the watchful 'care' of their new 'owners'.

The local Mafia were more observant. The activity of the local priest and three African nuns did not go unnoticed, and it was soon made clear to them that they were getting involved in interests that were not merely spiritual. They should get back to their church, they were told, before something might accidentally happen to it.

Sister Assumpta persevered, and slowly one or two girls began to break ranks and to tell of their harrowing existence, searching for some way out of their situation with dignity. But it was not easy. If they presented themselves to the local police, they would simply be treated as illegal immigrants and perhaps be imprisoned and then expelled and returned home to poverty, to live with the stigma of having been prostituted and to run even greater risks.

Fortunately, the trafficking of women and children was gaining media attention, and police and immigration officials at higher levels were becoming more sensitive to the problem. It was possible that those few girls who cooperated by revealing the mechanisms of the trafficking might receive permission at least for provisional residency. Padre Giorgio was back in my office asking if I knew of anyone who could provide him with a safe house, perhaps in Rome, to look after the girls during that period and to push for more progress with the immigration authorities.

Back in Nigeria, Sister Assumpta's colleagues had set up a small cooperative, which was providing employment to local girls and would be able to receive, without attracting much attention, at least the one or two girls who might return from Italy.

The story continues today. It has not been remarkably successful and it is limited to a small area. Just one or two girls have returned home, and there is some promise that others may be permitted to stay on in Europe legally and with dignity.

Looking back, this story is a kind of parable about how to address this modern form of slavery. Padre Giorgio intuitively knew that he first had to build a bridge between the sending and the receiving countries. That bridge ultimately would be the girls themselves. It was their lives that had been damaged and it was their courage alone that would break those Mafia rings that manage their departure and arrival, and the sordid market of intermediaries.

It was also clear that part of the answer is to give the girls and others like them in their home town some opportunity for economic activity, albeit modest. This gives them not only an income but also a sense of independence and personal autonomy.

The attitude of the police also needs to change. Initially, the police had thought to use only repressive measures, concerned simply with cleaning up the streets, ignoring the horrendous crime that was being perpetrated against these girls who are living in enslavement.

People do not know enough about this trafficking, which is so widespread in Europe. Why are such a huge number of foreign girls involved in prostitution in many European countries? Sometimes I feel that there are also disturbing hidden motives underlying this trend, in which foreign girls can be treated even more brutally as sex objects, because somehow they are considered entitled to fewer rights and less dignity precisely because of their racial or ethnic difference. If such is the case, then these girls are doubly enslaved.

In the two years since I met Padre Giorgio, I have been happy to see the issue of trafficking in women and children move higher and higher on the international agenda. Padre Giorgio and his co-workers have played their part, showing that concerned citizens can help make a change.

It is summer again and these days Padre Giorgio is ministering to the Roman and Neapolitan families on holidays. He knows well, however, that when summer ends, the poverty of his area will re-emerge, and his Nigerian parishioners will still be there paying the price of a freedom they may never attain. ▼

# WHAT ABOUT BOYS?

It's seldom talked about, but boys are also vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation. Although girls tend to be exploited in organized clubs, bordellos or houses, boys spend their time on their own or in small groups and are targeted in streets, parks, plazas and beaches.

- Sri Lanka's estimated 20,000-30,000 child prostitutes are primarily boys. From Europe, paedophiles can arrange to have one or more boys waiting for them when they arrive.
- In the Dominican Republic, young boys, known as 'Sanky Panky' boys, stay with foreign tourists on the beaches of Boca Chica and Sousa; some establish relationships that last for years. The beach boys, some as young as 13, become the sex tourist's annual partner during the week of the sex tourist's visit.
- In Haiti, sex between local boys and adult male tourists from the United States and Europe has existed in the tourist industry for many years.
- Boy prostitution is well established in the city of Prague. The majority of the boys are between 14 and 20, come from dysfunctional families and have run away from their homes and villages to earn easy money. Most of them are heterosexual but

are exploited mainly by men. Foreign clients include doctors, businessmen and politicians. The younger the boy, the higher the price.

- In cities such as Alexandria, Marrakesh and Tunis, the exploiters, often tourists, come from within the same country, from other countries within the region, or from Europe. Young boys are especially targeted.
- The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) estimates that over 50 percent of all child pornography seized in the United States depicts boys.

Boys are also victims of sexual violence and abuse. In Africa, young boys are often recruited into the armed forces not only to fight, but also to sexually service the soldiers. In Bosnia and Herzegovina during the conflict, men were forced to commit sexual atrocities against each other. In the United States, a 1998 study by researchers at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine reported that sexual abuse of boys appears to be under-recognized, underreported and under-treated. The researchers found that 8 to 16 per cent of the general male population had a history of sexual abuse, and that the boys at highest risk of sexual abuse were younger than 13 years, non-white, of low socio-economic status and not living with their fathers. Perpetrators tended to be known, but unrelated, males. Abuse frequently occurred outside the home,

involved penetration and took place more than once.

It is especially difficult for boys to disclose such abuse. If it was committed by a woman, the boy may not report the abuse because in many cultures, sexual experiences are a way of proving manhood. Masculine ideals promote the idea that no male ever resists sex, and the boy may not admit, even to himself, that he has been abused. If the abuse is committed by a male, a boy might have fears about homosexuality, a taboo subject in certain cultures.

Just as the survivor finds it difficult to believe what has happened to him, so do others respond with disbelief. When a young man discloses that he has been sexually abused, he is punished further if his 'manhood' and his sexual orientation are called into question, so it is common for boys to remain silent on the subject of sexual abuse.

According to researchers at the University of Pennsylvania School of Medicine, such societal shunning of the magnitude of the problem may contribute to the development of long-term psychosocial problems in the adult male victims of childhood sexual abuse. These may include mild to severe psychiatric disorders, substance abuse and serious sexual problems – including intimacy and sexual-identity problems, the early adoption of high-risk behaviours and the circular transformation of the child victim into an adult perpetrator.

# Trafficking

## Legislative responses



**By Pamela Shifman and Ken Franzblau of Equality Now\***

*In October 2000, the United States Congress passed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, a comprehensive bill designed to help federal law enforcement officials track down and prosecute traffickers. The legislation provides for punishment of up to life imprisonment for traffickers, provides shelter for victims and authorizes changes in immigration laws to allow relief from rapid deportation so human trafficking cases can be prosecuted.*

*Although it is still too soon to measure the impact of the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, it is clear that without adequate and comprehensive legislation, governments have limited means of punishing traffickers, protecting victims and preventing further victimization.*

**I**n 1998 in the United States, the Federal Bureau of Investigation raided a house in Atlanta, Georgia, after acquiring information that its occupants were engaging in a large-scale prostitution operation that recruited teenage Vietnamese girls. Ultimately, 13 individuals were charged under a number of different laws with smuggling, imprisoning and forcing into prostitution almost 1,000 women and girls, some as young as 13. The women and girls from China (including Hong Kong), the Lao People's Democratic Republic, Malaysia, Thailand and Viet Nam were smuggled into the United States for fees ranging from \$30,000 to \$40,000, which they were forced to pay back by working as prostitutes.

The house in Atlanta in which they were kept as virtual prisoners and forced to work as prostitutes looked "like a prison compound with an inordinate amount of wire mesh and barbed wire fencing that enclosed the house and lot."<sup>1</sup> Inside, there were seven mattresses on the floor in five squalid rooms. The women and girls were not able to leave the premises unless they were escorted by their captors. Armed Vietnamese gang members were used as guards and enforcers. The women and girls were moved across the United States every week to 10 days to service men in 13 different states.

Despite the known fact that large numbers of girls and young women were trafficked, subjected to brutality and imprisoned in terrible conditions, the longest sentence any of the traffickers received in this case was only 33 months in

\* Equality Now is an international human rights organization that advocates for the rights of girls and women around the world.

<sup>1</sup> McDonald, R. Robin, 'Atlanta House linked to prostitution ring; FBI: Asian girls used as sex slaves', *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*, 26 March 1998, 6F.

“They are always looking down on us and blaming us, but it’s not only us. It’s their husbands that are picking us up.

Everybody is in denial; everybody pinpoints us and is blaming us because we’re the ones out on the street. But they’re the ones that are picking us up and giving us money. They’re always calling us little sluts and whores, but they never say anything about the johns...like they’re picture-perfect guys.”

– Female youth, Saskatoon, Canada

(From *Sacred Lives: Canadian Aboriginal Children and Youth Speak Out About Sexual Exploitation*, Save the Children, Canada, 2000, p. 25)

prison.<sup>2</sup> According to one of the prosecutors, “If I had had evidence of coercion or of a vulnerable victim, I could have gotten harsher sentences,” but by the time the cases came to trial, “every one of my witnesses had been deported.”<sup>3</sup>

The US Central Intelligence Agency estimates that some 45,000 to 50,000 women and children are trafficked annually to the United States, bound for the sex industry or for factory and other work under egregious labour conditions. According to ECPAT International, also known as End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and the Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes, there are numerous reports of trafficking of children into the United States, but the cases are difficult to verify because of the underground and illegal nature of the trade. Trafficking through Mexico to the United States is one of the most prevalent routes. Internal trafficking is also a problem, with children from rural areas being trafficked into the sex industries of big cities.

The Atlanta case typifies a phenomenon around the world: Trafficking victims are treated as illegal migrants or as criminally complicit in their exploitation, rather than as victims, and they are immediately deported, which makes prosecuting the perpetrators exceedingly difficult. When children are involved, the consequences of deportation may be especially severe, since children may be returned to parents who sold them or to a home where they were sexually abused.

The Trafficking Victims Protection Act, passed in October 2000, seeks to dramatically change the way traffickers are prosecuted and victims are treated. Like laws in some other receiving countries, the US legislation provides harsh penalties for traffickers (particularly for those who traffic in children), and witness protection and limited immigration relief for victims. The US law also provides assistance for foreign governments to meet minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking and includes a provision calling for revocation of non-humanitarian assistance to countries that fail to meet minimum standards to eliminate trafficking. It also provides for assistance for reintegration or resettlement to victims of trafficking in the United States and in other countries and calls for initiatives to enhance economic opportunity for potential victims in an effort to deter trafficking.

It is still too early, however, to determine what kind of an impact the legislation will have in assisting in the arrest and conviction of traffickers. In *United States v Virchenko, et al.*, the first case under the new law, four people in Alaska were charged in February 2001 with conspiring to lure six Russian women and girls to Alaska and enslave them in a strip club in Anchorage. The indictment charges that the defendants recruited the females under false pretenses – to perform Russian folk dances in a

<sup>2</sup> Davis, Joyce M., and Nomi Morris, ‘As Many as 2 Million Women, Children Bought, Sold Each Year’, Knight Ridder/Tribune News Service, 3 January 2001.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

# PARTNERSHIPS: A unified response

Tackling the sexual exploitation of children demands responses that cut across national borders. The powerful forces that allow the use of children for adults' sexual gratification – organized crime, centuries-old traditions and beliefs, a growing drug trade and a conspiracy of silence – require a forceful response. Governments, national and international NGOs, United Nations agencies, regional organizations and the private sector must collaborate and draw upon one another's strengths if there is any progress to be made in putting an end to the exploitation of children.

In recent years, important international standards have been established:

- In 1999, the International Labour Organization (ILO) adopted the Convention Concerning the Prohibition and Immediate Action for Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour (No. 182), which addresses, among other issues, the sale and trafficking of children, child prostitution and child pornography.
- In May 2000, the UN General Assembly adopted an Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. Later the same year, in November, the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime, was adopted by the General Assembly, providing the first internationally agreed definition of trafficking.

Important initiatives have developed through these partnerships:

- The Stability Pact for South-Eastern Europe, which has established a Task Force on Trafficking in Human Beings. It focuses on awareness-raising, training and exchange programmes, law enforcement and cooperation, victim protection, return and reintegration assistance, legislative reform and prevention.
- The Sub-Regional Consultation on the Development of Strategies to fight Child Trafficking for Exploitative Labour Purposes in West and Central Africa, which led to the adoption of a Common Platform for Action by a number of countries in the region.
- The UN inter-agency project to combat trafficking in women and children in the Mekong sub-region; the ILO International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) project on combating trafficking in children and women for labour exploitation in the Mekong sub-region and South Asia; and the International Organization for Migration project on the return and reintegration of trafficked women from China to Viet Nam.

cultural festival – only to force them into servitude once they arrived in the United States. The defendants were charged with crimes, including kidnapping, forced labour and interstate transportation of minors for immoral purposes, that could have resulted in sentences of life imprisonment if convicted on all counts. In June 2001, three of the defendants pled guilty to a number of charges, including immigration fraud and transporting minors for illegal sexual activities. The sentencing was scheduled for 24 August 2001. The victims were given temporary legal immigration status and were being housed in a safe location.

The Agenda for Action of the World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Stockholm (Sweden) in 1996 set forth specific legal standards for the protection of children from sexual exploitation. These included requirements to “develop or strengthen and implement national laws to establish the criminal responsibility of service providers, customers and intermediaries in child prostitution, child trafficking...and other unlawful sexual activity” and “in the case of trafficking of children, develop and implement national laws, policies and programmes to protect children from being trafficked within or across borders and penalize the traffickers.”

While countries as diverse as Albania, Bangladesh, Costa Rica, Germany and the United States have adopted statutes to address trafficking, unfortunately, five years after Stockholm, most national legislation remains inadequate. According to the Protection Project at Johns Hopkins University, as of February 2001 only 48 countries had laws that criminalized trafficking for sexual purposes. Even in countries where such legislation exists, law enforcement personnel and prosecutors often do not accord high priority to trafficking-related offences.

Problems concerning the adequacy and enforcement of anti-trafficking legislation are not related to nations' geography, wealth

or culture. Wealthy and poor countries alike struggle both to enact, and then to enforce, good legislation. In Albania, efforts to halt the trafficking of women and children have been hampered by, among other challenges, an ineffectual law enforcement response to the problem. Poverty, coupled with social unrest caused by the crisis in the Balkans, makes Albania fertile ground for traffickers. It is estimated that 60 per cent of Albanians trafficked are children, tricked or abducted into prostitution. In an International Office for Migration (IOM) study of third country national trafficking through Albania, 10 per cent of the victims interviewed witnessed some police involvement in the trafficking and conditioning process. In March 2001, Albania introduced a new law on trafficking. This is an important step, but it remains to be seen whether the country will be able to follow it with effective enforcement.

Yet even when laws address trafficking, the punishments prescribed often do not reflect the seriousness of the crime. In many countries, the penalties for human trafficking are less than those for arms or drugs trafficking. For example, legislation in Malaysia provides for a mandatory death penalty for convicted drug traffickers, while under Section 16 of the Women and Girls Protection Act of 1973, anyone convicted of trafficking or related offences is subject to a maximum five-year imprisonment. Furthermore, in countries around the world, it is more common for victims to be arrested than their traffickers or others who exploit them. Some other countries are legalizing prostitution as a strategy to stop child trafficking. So far, however, although the strategy needs further study, it appears not to have stopped trafficking and, we believe, is likely to do the opposite by creating more hospitable conditions for commercial sex industries.

Anti-trafficking legislation with strong criminal sanctions for traffickers may not be enough unless it is coupled with an international effort to address demand. For example, in her 2001 report to the Commission on Human Rights, Radhika Coomaraswamy, the first UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences, revealed that NGO activists in Bangladesh estimate that 10,000-15,000 girls and women are trafficked each year to India from Bangladesh, which has

## EARLY MARRIAGE: A harmful tradition

Although the legal age of marriage has risen steadily in countries around the world, tradition often takes precedence over new laws. For example, in Nepal – where the average age at first marriage is 19 years – 7 per cent of girls are married before they are 10 years old and 40 per cent before they are 15. In Niger, Afghanistan and Bangladesh, 70 per cent, 54 per cent and 51 per cent of girls respectively are married by age 18. Often the husbands are distant relatives; some are two or three times older than the girls.

One of the main reasons girls are

married early is economic. In sub-Saharan Africa, the bride's family may receive cattle from the groom's family as the 'bride price' for their daughter. In India, where poor families often go into debt providing dowry payments to the groom's family, the younger the bride, the lower the dowry. Some communities that prize virginity before marriage feel that marrying girls early 'protects' them from out-of-wedlock pregnancies.

When a girl marries early, it usually means the end of her education if she is in school and the end of her autonomy to make important decisions about work, her health and her well-being. Expected to reproduce soon after marriage, she is often denied access to contraception and lacks the power to

negotiate safe-sex practices, putting her at risk for contracting sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS. Many adolescent girls who give birth do so without attending an antenatal clinic or receiving the help of a professional midwife. An alarming 60,000 of them die each year due to complications of childbirth and unsafe abortion.

Abuse is common in child marriages. A study in Jordan, published in 2000, found that 26 per cent of reported cases of domestic violence were committed against wives under 18. Girls who choose to run away out of desperation or who choose a marriage partner against their parent's wishes may be punished or even killed by their families.

one of the more stringent laws against trafficking. Bangladesh's Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000, makes the punishment for trafficking in children life imprisonment or the death penalty.

Yet despite the presence of such a law, trafficking of women and children from Bangladesh to India, Pakistan and Middle Eastern countries remains an enormous problem, with few prosecutions. According to the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association, there is a great demand for underage Bangladeshi girls in brothels in India as they are believed to be free from sexually transmitted infections. The demand for young girls raises their market value and makes it harder to intervene effectively against the traffickers. There is some movement toward addressing the demand for sexual exploitation of girls and young women – one of the most critical, most difficult and least attempted areas of legislation. Sweden, for example, has adopted a unique strategy that explicitly penalizes 'customers' of prostitution, and not the prostitutes themselves.<sup>4</sup> The concept is promising and should be considered elsewhere.

During the five years since the World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, the most promising legislative gains have been on the international law front. The International Labour Organization Convention 182 on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour came into force in November 2000. It explicitly calls on States to "take immediate and effective measures to secure the prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour as a matter of urgency."<sup>5</sup> This is an important advance, despite the fact that trafficking of children for sexual purposes is included under the definition of worst forms of child 'labour'.

In May 2000, the UN General Assembly adopted the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. Also of particular importance was the passage of the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, in November 2000. This far-reaching Protocol presents an opportunity for governments to jump-start national laws and to harmonize regional legislation and enforcement efforts. It specifically recognizes the particular vulnerability of children and calls for their special needs to be taken into account. Unfortunately, the wording of some of its most critical provisions is not as strong as it could be. For example, article 7 calls on each State to "consider adopting legislative or other appropriate measures that permit victims of trafficking in persons to remain in its territory, temporarily or permanently, in appropriate cases." In spite of this, the Protocol's recommendations are strong and comprehensive. As of 21 September 2001, the Protocol had been signed by 88 countries and ratified by 3. Yet in order for it to have a real impact on the development of successful national legislation, countries will need to adopt all the relevant recommendations into their domestic laws and expend the necessary financial and other resources to ensure implementation.

Although these evolving international standards have helped to highlight the problem of trafficking, the enforcement of these standards remains challenging. Many of the same key steps to be taken by governments against trafficking were set forth in the 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others, including international cooperation for the prosecution of traffickers and measures for the prevention of prostitution and the rehabilitation of prostituted women. Yet those recommendations were never uniformly adopted. The distinction between children and women in the context of sex trafficking is a blurry one, as recruitment by traffickers, and the consequent abuse of women in the industry, often begins with girls but continues through and beyond their age of majority. Moreover, very few anti-trafficking laws adequately address the primary root causes of sex trafficking – the demand that exists virtually everywhere for children and young women to sexually exploit, and the grinding poverty that generates the supply of children and women, desperate to survive. These may be the most difficult issues to address. Ultimately, however, only by addressing them can the scourge of trafficking in both children and women be ended. ▼

<sup>4</sup> Sweden's Violence Against Women Act prohibits the purchase of sexual services but not the selling because "this person is a weaker partner who is exploited by those who want only to satisfy their sexual drives."

<sup>5</sup> Along with many children and women's rights organizations, the authors believe that child sexual exploitation should not be considered a form of child labour. Although Convention 182 does not distinguish between sexual exploitation and labour, nevertheless it provides important protection for trafficked children.

# FUELLING THE SUPPLY

Like any industry, the commercial sexual exploitation of children adheres to the laws of supply and demand. A number of factors fuel it.

**POVERTY:** Procurement agents thrive in urban slums and poor rural villages, where poverty severely blunts educational and employment opportunities. These agents bribe, coerce and lie to families, promising marriage or employment, often as domestic servants, to obtain children. Then they transport the children long distances, sometimes across borders and along well-worn clandestine drug routes. Families may also willingly send children to areas where there are better chances of a good job, inadvertently exposing the children to the risk of exploitation.

**GENDER DISCRIMINATION:** Since in many societies men are held in higher esteem than women, women and girls are often treated as property and denied a voice and a right to protection against violence. Families who don't value female children may choose to keep them from school or marry them off early, dramatically limiting their life opportunities and increasing their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse.

**WAR, NATURAL DISASTERS AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY:** Sexual violence flourishes in situations where norms break down. Poverty, hunger and general desperation may place women and children in situations in which they are forced to exchange sex for food, shelter and survival. *(See panel, page 31.)*

**CULTURE:** Some cultures have long-standing practices, such as child marriage, that make the sexual exploitation of children permissible. More often, though, the breakdown of cultural taboos raises the risks enormously. Long-held cultural mores can be weakened by media influences, tourism and the promotion of materialistic pursuits, making behaviour once considered inappropriate appear normal.

**HIV/AIDS:** Many exploiters are under the mistaken notion that younger children don't carry HIV. Yet children who are not fully grown are more likely than adults to be injured by penetrative sex, making it easier for the virus to enter their bodies. Children are also unlikely to be able to insist on safe sex practices or to even have information regarding risks of infection or access to condoms. Finally, HIV/AIDS has resulted in a massive rise in the number of orphans and child-headed households in which children must be wage earners. This vulnerability, along with the social stigma associated with AIDS in many parts of the world, leaves these children with few defences against exploitation.

**WEAK LAWS AND CORRUPT LAW ENFORCEMENT:** Often, police are underpaid, overworked and lack resources, making them an easy target for bribery. Some police officers work as guards in brothels in their spare time, or get involved in trafficking. Efforts to fight against commercial sexual exploitation may also be crippled by inadequate laws.

**GLOBALIZATION:** The greater movement of people and goods occurring as a result of globalization has made it much easier for traffickers to transport children across borders and has increased the number of destinations where paedophiles can seek sex with children. In many countries, globalization has also increased unemployment and reduced wages and social spending, plunging more families into poverty.

**NEW COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY:** New technology can help to protect children, but it can also be used to exploit them. The Internet, for example, knows no national boundaries and is almost without regulation. Today, text, images, and audio and video files can be sent around the world in seconds. Child pornography, sex tourism information and mail-order brides are offered openly on the Internet, while forums on the Internet have become meeting grounds for pimps selling women and predators stalking children.

**FAMILY DYSFUNCTION AND BREAKDOWN:** Sometimes parents cannot cope with the stress in their lives and become physically, emotionally or sexually abusive. Divorce and remarriage can also place a strain on family relationships, as can children with unresolved conflicts of sexual identity. When families become homeless, or are forced to move from place to place, parents' abilities to care for and protect their children are also severely limited. Sometimes children run away; other times, they are left to fend for themselves.



# Albania's trafficked children

## Begging for a better life

**O**n a warm spring evening in Thessaloniki, Greece's second largest city, tourists walk along the waterfront promenade and wander into the shops that ring one of the city's famous squares. In front of a corner café, a young boy with jet black hair and an infectious smile strums his guitar as patrons toss him a few coins for his efforts.

The boy's name is Michael. He is a street child from neighbouring Albania. As he bounces around the plaza in his white shorts, Pokemon socks and bright yellow sneakers, it is not obvious that the 11-year-old is one of approximately 3,000 Albanian children who have been trafficked to Greece and Italy to beg for money.

What appears to be a haphazard collection of beggars in Thessaloniki is actually an organized criminal racket. Since the fall of Communism in 1991, Albania has become a major supplier of trafficked children into neighbouring European countries. The traffickers monitor the children constantly, usually collecting all their earnings, although occasionally they send money home to the children's parents. Children between 4 and 7 years of age are especially prized since they make the most money. And traffickers will even 'rent' infants for female beggars.

"I must bring 5,000 drachmas (\$12.50) to my owner each day," says Michael. "I must work to make money for my mother." If he doesn't make his daily quota, he says he will be beaten by the man who 'owns' him.

Michael has been begging on the streets of Thessaloniki since he was five years old. He is Roma, the ethnic minority often referred to as Gypsy, and his family is poor. He attended school for only two years and is illiterate. His mother gave permission to a neighbour – a trafficker – to take Michael to Greece so that the boy could earn money for the family. The trafficker promised to send back \$70 each month. Social workers say that Michael's 13-year-old sister is also in Greece and is being prostituted by her 'owner'. His 6-year-old brother is living in a children's home in Thessaloniki.

Michael is trapped between two violent worlds. He is abused on the streets of Greece and he is not safe at home. "If I go home, my mother will beat me," he explains. Asked about marks on his neck, he says, "A dog scratched me." His arm is marked by cigarette burns, a torture commonly employed by traffickers.

Nearly every adult has betrayed Michael. Greek authorities treat street children as criminals, instead of as victims. "Most of them are thieves and beggars," says a policeman in Thessaloniki. The officer explains that when police detain children, they try, usually without success, to contact the parents. Unaccompanied children are taken to the police station;

**“My sister-in-law convinced me to marry Robert. She said he was handsome and had money. After we were married, Robert said we should go to Italy because there is more opportunity there. We went at night in a speedboat. After one week in Italy, Robert asked me to work on the street. I said no. Then he tortured me. He left me in a bath with cold water. Then he tied me naked to a bed with belts and beat me. He didn’t give me any food.**

**“I was a slave for him. I don’t consider him my husband. I was forced to work in the street. I didn’t want to do it. He wouldn’t permit me to sleep even. Sometimes I worked for 24 hours straight. He gained a lot from me and I gained nothing.”**

**– Sylvia, Albanian girl coerced into marriage and prostitution in Italy at age 14**

often they are jailed. As for arresting the traffickers, the policeman shrugs. “It is difficult to catch them,” he says, “and it is difficult to prosecute them because the children will not testify.” Children who are arrested are returned to Albania.

At the Greek-Albanian border near the city of Korca, a blue Greek police bus deposits about 50 Albanians. The group is herded over to the Albanian border post, where everyone is waved through with minimal delay. Within minutes, the group of deportees vanishes into waiting minibus taxis. Children are frequently returned to traffickers, who loiter just beyond Albanian immigration and march them back into Greece. In some cases, Albanian police are alleged to collude with traffickers.

So far, Michael has escaped deportation. Although he doesn’t want to go home, he wants to leave Thessaloniki. “Take me with you to Italy. Or America,” he pleads. When asked what he would do there, he says, “I want to go to school.”

## **Stopping trafficking at the source**

Tucked behind drab cement apartment buildings in the city of Elbasan in Albania is the gated courtyard of Sule Misiri, a local public school. In a small classroom decorated with brightly coloured murals on children’s rights, about 30 students from 12 to 16 years old are singing songs. All of the children have worked on the streets; about 80 per cent were trafficked to Greece. Most of them are Roma. According to Ndihme per Femjet (‘Help the Children’) or NPF, some 80 per cent of the street children trafficked to Greece were either sexually abused or exploited. NPF workers say that street children over age 8 or 9, especially girls, are typically victims of rape, sexual abuse or forced prostitution.

Since 1998, with UNICEF support, NPF has helped to reintegrate some 400 children annually into schools in four Albanian cities (Berat, Elbasan, Korca and Tirana). Siblings of the children taking NPF classes also receive counselling and support, increasing the number of children who benefit directly or indirectly from NPF’s work to 2,500 each year.

In Elbasan, 100 children who have dropped out or are at high risk of dropping out are enrolled in classes to help them catch up on the years of school that they have missed. Each child is approached in the street by NPF social workers, then evaluated by teachers, who devise an individual learning plan. NPF visits families twice each month to assess their needs and to advocate on behalf of the children within their families and schools.

Fourteen-year-old Andreas first went to Greece when he was six. “I walked over the mountains for seven days,” he says.

# DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

*Sexual abuse* of children occurs when a child is used as an object of sexual gratification for an older or more knowledgeable child or adult (a stranger, sibling or person in a position of authority, such as a parent or caregiver). These contacts or interactions are often carried out against the child using force, trickery, bribes, threats or pressure. Sexual abuse can be physical, verbal or emotional.

*Commercial sexual exploitation* is the use of a child for sexual purposes in exchange for cash or favours between the customer, intermediary or agent and others who profit from the trade in children for these purposes (parent, family member, procurer, teacher). The United Nations refers to three forms of commercial sexual exploitation of children: child prostitution; trafficking and sale of children across borders and within countries for sexual purposes; and child pornography.

Perpetrators benefit from the myths surrounding sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation to lure and recruit children.

**MYTH:** *Child sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation are not a widespread problem.*

**FACT:** Most sexual abuse of children never comes to the attention of government authorities. Secrecy and intense feelings of shame may prevent children – and adults aware of the abuse – from seeking help. Existing studies present a disturbing picture:

- Research with advanced secondary and university students in Sri Lanka revealed that 12 per cent of girls and 20 per cent of boys said they had experienced sexual abuse as children.
- In a research study carried out in Kingston (Jamaica), it was reported that among 450 schoolchildren between the ages of 13 and 14, 13 per cent had experienced attempted rape.
- In a national study of runaway and homeless youth in the United States, 17 per cent of homeless youth surveyed had been forced into unwanted sexual activity by a family or household member.

There are no adequately documented figures on the number of children who are sexually exploited for commercial purposes. The clandestine nature of the international sex industry has made it impossible to move beyond broad estimates.

- Approximately 1 million children enter the sex trade every year.
- Asia Watch, a non-governmental organization (NGO), has reported that as many as 50,000 Nepalese girls have been sold and trafficked to India as bonded labour in Bombay brothels.
- There are an estimated 25,000 child sex workers in the Dominican Republic.
- In West Africa, an estimated 35,000 children are sex workers.

**MYTH:** *Only girls are exposed to sexual exploitation.*

**FACT:** Although the majority of sexually abused and exploited children are girls, boys are also victims. The sexual abuse of boys is less frequently reported than the abuse of girls and has received less recognition. Because many societies expect boys and men to be in control of their emotions, other people and their environment, it is particularly difficult for boys to disclose that they have been sexually assaulted. Adolescent boys who are targeted by other men may feel that their manhood and sexual orientation will be called into question if they reveal the abuse. Adolescent boys who are targeted by older females may not view the sexual contact as abusive.

**MYTH:** *Child sexual exploitation is a recent phenomenon largely initiated by sex tourists.*

**FACT:** The international media has brought a great deal of attention to sex tourism, but child sexual exploitation has a long history, with most abuse perpetrated by members of the local community.

**MYTH:** *Sex exploiters are all paedophiles and strangers.*

**FACT:** Male paedophiles are among the abusers, but most abusers are 'situational' offenders, who, at times of stress, or out of convenience or curiosity, engage in sexual activity with children. A majority of sexually abused children who are not involved in commercial sexual activity are abused by someone they know: parents, step-parents, teachers, doctors, relatives, clergy and neighbours.

**MYTH:** *Sex with a virgin or a young child may prevent or cure HIV/AIDS.*

**FACT:** Children trapped in prostitution are actually at greater risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV/AIDS, than adults are. Their developing bodies make them less able to resist sexual dominance and more vulnerable to the injuries of aggression.

**MYTH:** *Children in prostitution choose this profession.*

**FACT:** Children cannot choose to be involved in prostitution. They are forced into it by circumstances, are coerced, tricked or abducted, or have fled from situations of abuse and neglect. Many have a history of sexual abuse that has left them with feelings of helplessness, low self-esteem and an unhealthy perspective about sexuality.

**MYTH:** *Sexual exploitation of children is caused by poverty.*

**FACT:** Poverty creates conditions that can contribute to sexual exploitation, but poverty alone is not a reason why children are sold into commercial sex. In poor communities, there is generally a high rate of illiteracy and a lack of marketable skills. These conditions make it easier for procurement agents to obtain children for the sex trade from urban slums and poor rural villages. Family breakdown, globalization, local culture, the low status of women and weak law enforcement all contribute to the exploitation of children. Some families hand over their children to agents or middlemen with full knowledge of what will happen. At times, this is to relieve poverty; at other times, the family is seeking additional material gain.

**MYTH:** *Sexual abuse of children is not always damaging.*

**FACT:** Sexual abuse of children is an act of violence. Even if there are no physical injuries, there is always psychological damage. Children who are sexually abused are denied a childhood and betrayed by a person who is in a position of authority and trust.

**MYTH:** *The effects of sexual abuse are clear and evident.*

**FACT:** Physical evidence of sexual abuse is rare. Because most children cannot or do not tell about being sexually abused, it is up to concerned adults to recognize signs of abuse. Unfortunately, there is no single behaviour that proves that a child has been sexually abused. Such children may exhibit a wide range of behaviours, including: difficulty concentrating in school; withdrawal from family and friends; sleep disturbances; depression; irritability; a sudden loss of or increase in appetite; aggressiveness; inappropriate sexual play with peers, toys or themselves; signs of regression like thumb-sucking, bed-wetting or acting like an infant; and alcohol and drug use.

**MYTH:** *Child victims come from poor families.*

**FACT:** Sexual abuse and exploitation can take place anywhere. The offenders come from all social groups and races, and education and income levels. Middle and upper-class families, however, are more capable of hiding the abuse and its consequences.

“I was with others, but not my parents.” After begging for several months in Thessaloniki, he was arrested and taken to the Albanian border. “I went back walking over the mountains the same day,” he says. “I thought Greece was a paradise where people give you money and flowers. But when I arrived, I saw the reality. I saw little kids sleeping in the street. Some of them were tortured and maltreated by their ‘owners.’” Yet Andreas kept returning to Greece. He estimates that he has been to Greece “100 times.” Sometimes he was taken there by traffickers, other times he went on his own. “My parents didn’t really want me to go to Greece,” he says, peering at his feet, “but they didn’t try to get me back.” His father was in jail, and “for a year I went to Greece just to make enough money to get my father out of prison.” Andreas even spent three months himself in a Greek jail.

Today, with assistance from NPF, Andreas is back in school. “I like all these school activities,” he says. “It helps me not be in the street.” Andreas says that someday he hopes to be a woodworker.

On the other side of Elbasan, behind the two-story school Shkolla Sjecare, a crush of students line a football pitch. Players sprint after the ball to the ear-splitting cheers of their classmates. About 50 of these young people (nearly half of the children playing) are considered at risk for being trafficked because of Elbasan’s high level of poverty.

A programme run by the international NGO Terre des Hommes and sponsored by UNICEF is trying to prevent such at-risk children, primarily Roma, from being trafficked. The programme, which began in October 2000, is working with 3,000 children in 10 schools in Elbasan and Korca, the main cities in Albania from which children are trafficked to Greece. Social workers identify families that have unemployed parents or have other relatives who have emigrated. Their children are integrated into the regular school population, and a prevention team works with both the school and family to inform them of the harsh realities of trafficking. The prevention teams produce leaflets, a video and posters that are distributed in the community to raise awareness about the difficulties that children face abroad.

“It is a good start to integrate all these children who have social problems to prevent drop-outs,” says school director Hilmi Muzhaqi. “This is just the beginning. We must work hard with the community to stop the problem.”

## **The poverty-trafficking nexus**

Poverty, ignorance and the low status of women lie at the heart of the trafficking problem. With a GNP per capita of \$870 (1999), Albania is the second poorest country in Europe. (The Republic of Moldova, also a major source of trafficked children, is the poorest.) Isolated for over four decades under the authoritarian rule of the late President Enver Hoxha, Albanians had little understanding of the rest of the world after the fall of Communism.

“The criminals were the first to discover Europe,” says Tariq, an NPF social worker. “When they went looking for business abroad, they saw begging as a business.” With the trafficker’s sudden wealth and their promise to pay families for the use of their children, “poor families looked at them like heroes.”

Albania’s official response to trafficking has been slow and ineffective. In a recent study conducted by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) and the International Catholic Migration Commission (ICMC), 10 per cent of women trafficked for prostitution witnessed the involvement of Albanian police in some aspect of the trafficking. “The average Albanian policeman earns \$150 per month,” explains an official of Albania’s Ministry of Public Order. “A trafficker will pay a policeman 10 times that amount to look the other way.”

Edmond Ramazani and his wife live in a shack in Elbasan with a leaking roof and dirt floor. Photos of their smiling

children are tacked loosely to the wall. Ramazani is the father of seven children, all of whom have gone abroad to work. Four daughters are working in Italy as prostitutes – one of them was recently killed, most likely by her pimp – and a son is in jail in Greece. Only their 14-year-old daughter Elsa lives with them. Elsa worked as a beggar in Greece from age 4 to 13. She is now a student in the NPF school reintegration programme.

“I’m afraid about my children going to Greece,” says Ramazani’s wife. “But if they go with my neighbour, it feels OK. They are being looked after.” Tariq says that the parents know that the neighbour is a trafficker.

“My neighbour kept his promise and gave me money as planned,” says Ramazani, explaining why he allowed Elsa to work in Greece. Tariq has heard that Elsa is being sexually abused by a relative and is concerned that the girl may run away from home. He is trying to keep Elsa in school for one or two more years.

“We hope that when she gets work and a job, she can become someone in society,” says Tariq. “Then we can break this cycle where a trafficked child becomes a trafficker, and exploited children become exploiting parents.”

### **Child prostitutes: Albania’s saddest export**

Rachel, a 12-year-old Roma girl from Korca, a city near the Greek border, believed her new husband Stephan when he vowed to love and care for her. Rachel had just dropped out of school and was working in a cigarette factory. When Stephan, who was 29, suggested that they move abroad to have a better life, she married him.

Three months after their wedding, Stephan persuaded Rachel to travel to Italy with him. Soon after they arrived, Stephan asked Rachel to work on the street as a prostitute. “I didn’t know what prostitution meant,” says Rachel, now 15. “I thought it was only a job. I didn’t know what kind of job it was.”

Virtually every town in Albania has been affected by trafficking. According to a 2001 report by Save the Children, there are 30,000 Albanians working abroad as prostitutes. Most of them are teenage girls who were coerced, deceived and kidnapped, frequently by Albanian pimps and traffickers who are known to the family. In some remote areas where students must walk long distances to school, up to 90 per cent of girls no longer attend high school out of fear for their security. Girls are sold to pimps in Italy for \$2,500 to \$4,000; young virgins reportedly fetch up to \$10,000. Sometimes girls go abroad to be prostitutes, thinking they will ‘get rich quick’ and retire and unaware of the brutality they will face. According to Save the Children, the Italian Ministry of the Interior reported that 168 foreign prostitutes were murdered in 2000, the majority of them Albanian and Nigerian women who were killed by their pimps.

Rachel’s husband became her pimp. “I worked morning till night every day,” says Rachel. She worked on a highway and had to earn \$250 per night, requiring her to see about 10 clients. “If I didn’t earn that money, he would beat me,” she recalls.

Rachel thought her nightmare was over when she was arrested by the Italian police. They deported her on a ferry back to Vlore (Albania). But immediately upon her arrival in Vlore, her brother-in-law saw her and placed her on a speedboat back to Italy. This occurred three times.

Rachel is now taking correspondence classes in a programme run by NPF and sponsored by UNICEF. She lives in a rundown one-room house with her mother, brother, sister-in-law and two children. She recently passed her language exam, is attending vocational training classes in hairdressing and sewing, and hopes to get her high school diploma. Eventually, she’d like to work in a clothing factory. ▼



## A village network fights back

**P**eople in Battambang province in Cambodia are paying attention to this warning: Every child is at risk of sexual exploitation.

Located along the main route to Thailand, Thmar Kol district in Battambang province is around 90 kilometres from Poipet, the main border crossing. Not so long ago, Poipet was a quiet rural village. Today, luxurious casinos are open around the clock, catering mainly to Thais who travel to Cambodia to gamble. The area has become a magnet for landless, unskilled and uneducated Cambodian families, who come from all over the country looking for jobs. It has also become fertile ground for sex traffickers and exploiters.

“Sometimes it is very difficult for me to tell when a child is at risk, so a while back I made the decision to be cautious,” says Mr. Phat, the Community Social Helper at O’Nheou village in Thmar Kol. “Nowadays, I consider that any child may be at risk until I am completely convinced otherwise.”

Mr. Phat is part of a network of concerned community members dedicated to reclaiming their children. In 1999, with support from UNICEF, 52 villages set up the Community-Based Child Protection Network (CBCPN), designed to prevent sexual exploitation as well as other forms of child abuse, neglect or exploitation. The network educates the community about trafficking and other potential dangers facing their children, detects children at risk and intervenes when necessary.

Prostitution is widespread in large and small urban and market centres throughout Cambodia. Small-scale surveys conducted by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in 1995 indicated that at least one third of sex workers in Cambodia were under the age of 18. Two years later, the Human Rights Task Force on Cambodia, an international NGO, reported, “Although the problem is still at its early stage, having appeared in its more organized form only within the last two to three years, the trafficking and prostitution of women is spreading fast.”

Mr. Phat and the villagers he works with have seen for themselves that children are at risk of sexual exploitation when parents are not able to provide them with protection and support. Poverty, especially, creates dangerous situations for children. In Battambang province, poor and landless mothers and fathers struggle with addictions to alcohol, drugs and gambling, and children are victims of domestic violence, physical and sexual abuse and neglect. Some parents leave their homes to search for work on the Thai side of the border, leaving their children behind. Many children do not go to school.

“I’m 19 years old. Last year I left home to find a job. I went away with my brother aiming to get a job in Zhejiang. Arriving in a town, we stopped for breakfast. There we met a man called Wu. My brother knew him because they had worked together. Wu said he was a businessman and that he would pay for the trip for us. At a certain point he said he had no money left. We didn’t have any money either. He made some phone calls and later on an old man came to watch me. Afterwards, he bought me.

“People from that area would take any girl like me. They don’t have many females there. I was sold and had to live with him. I spent six months with him. It was a frightening experience. I could not escape and I had no money even for a phone call. I always wanted to return home....

“Those selling other people...I hate them most. All I wanted was to get a job...why sell me? I don’t want to think back. I can’t recall the past anymore.... It’s so painful.”

– 19-year-old from China

## A brutal rape

Two years ago, the parents of eight-year-old Sophea\* sent her to the village of Bang Preng to live with her grandmother. She had been living with her parents in Thailand, where they had gone to work on a sugar-cane plantation. When she arrived at her grandmother’s, Sophea enrolled at the village school.

A few months later, a 21-year-old man, a distant relative and former neighbour who had gone to work with Sophea’s parents, also returned to the village. Sophea’s grandmother agreed to let him stay in her home until he got settled. Ten days later, the man raped Sophea in the garden of her home.

“I wasn’t worried or frightened at all at first,” says Sophea. “My brother, sister and I were all playing in the garden. Then he came out to join us. At some point my sister and brother went inside, but only for a short time. When my sister came back, I realized that something was wrong, because he pushed me under a bush out of sight of my sister. When she asked for me, he told her to go away.”

The next day, when Sophea’s grandmother saw the blood and the wounds, she learned what had happened.

Sophea’s grandmother turned directly to the village’s trained Community Social Helper. Earlier that year, the Community Social Helper had organized a village meeting at which he spoke about the risks facing children and about the programme and explained his role. When he heard what had happened, the Community Social Helper immediately visited the house and filed his report with the district police.

Sophea spent two weeks in Thmar Kol hospital. Her grandmother received financial support from the Child Village Social Fund to pay the medical expenses. The Community Social Helper informed the Provincial Social Affairs staff, who presented the case at the Provincial Child Protection Committee meeting. Through this committee, which includes government agencies as well as NGOs working in the fields of social services, human rights and legal assistance, Sophea was provided with a lawyer, free of charge, as well as with transport costs to participate in the trial. The young man, who fled after the crime, was caught by the police and sentenced to a six-year prison term, which he is serving in Battambang. Sophea’s family received 1 million riel (about \$350) in compensation from the man’s family. Most of it has been spent on Sophea’s continuing medical costs.

\* Names in this article have been changed to protect the children’s identity.

## Communities on alert

The Community-Based Child Protection Network recognizes that supporting families is critical to protecting children. In fact, the success of the programme rests firmly on the shoulders of the families and communities it is intended to help.

Each village selects a Community Social Helper and a Child Protection Focal Point, who are trained in child rights and on how to identify children at risk. Health workers, local police, primary schoolteachers, government staff from the ministries of social affairs, women's affairs, health and education, and police departments at the district and provincial level, as well as the commune chief or vice-chief, are also trained to identify exploited and abused children, take action and respond to referrals from the villages, based on their roles and responsibilities. For example, teachers are trained to identify children who have been abused, health workers on how to respond when a child victim of sexual or physical abuse comes to the health centre and police on law-enforcement issues that concern children. In the future, Buddhist pagoda committees will be trained in promoting moral support to children and families affected by HIV/AIDS and in fighting discrimination against those families affected.

“Formerly, people here didn't pay much attention to children,” says Phuong Sith from the Provincial Social Affairs Department in Battambang and coordinator for this programme. “They considered that a child's problems were the result of his past life or because of private issues. After the launch of the programme, people began to question their old beliefs and to view things differently. They now understand that children have rights, that children need to be protected and that there are laws to protect them.”

Getting children into school and keeping them from dropping out is a priority of the programme. In the villages of Thmar Kol, almost 1,300 children were able to attend school with assistance from the Village Social Fund. “Without the chance of schooling,” says Community Social Helper Kien Soming, “our children will never gain the knowledge needed to improve their lives and escape poverty. In other words, without education, they will remain vulnerable.”

## Deceived and trafficked

It is almost a year to the day that Srey Kanya\* became the sixth victim of trafficker Ith Sitha. Srey Kanya was sitting outside her home weaving rush mats for her mother when Mrs. Ith approached her. Mrs. Ith was well-dressed and spoke kindly to Srey Kanya. “You're too smart to be tucked away in this village,” said Mrs. Ith. “You should be in the town working in a good job that pays a high salary. I can help you if you like.”

Srey Kanya was flattered. She was 15 years old and knew life in the village didn't hold a bright future for her. She had also had many disagreements with her mother, and she felt that her parents might be glad if she left and got a job through which she could send them back some money.

But there was no decent, well-paid job for Srey Kanya. Instead, she ended up in a brothel in Phnom Penh city.

Several weeks later, Mrs. Ith returned to deceive another young girl. This time, however, the girl's parents called the district police, who had been trained as part of the network. They intercepted Mrs. Ith with her young victim as they were on their way to Battambang on the back of a motor taxi.

When she was interrogated, Mrs. Ith revealed the whereabouts of Srey Kanya and the other girls. With the cooperation

of the local and provincial police, along with the Cambodia Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and the NGO Ligue Cambodienne des Droits de l'Homme, Srey Kanya was rescued and Mrs. Ith was put behind bars.

Still, not all children get the help they need. There are not enough referral services, especially for the mentally handicapped, the deaf or the blind, or for anyone requiring professional psychosocial counselling.

Each child assisted motivates members of the network to be more vigilant. "When we hold our review meetings, we go through the list of children we have helped," says Mr. Phat. "The children who can now go to school, the child who receives much-needed medical treatment, a family dispute resolved, the teenage girl who can go to Battambang to learn sewing. . . . Every one of them makes this work so worthwhile. And it isn't as if I'm doing it alone, because we are all in this together."

The programme is expected to be implemented in three additional locations in Cambodia by the end of 2001. ▼

## REACHING THE COMMUNITY IN CAMBODIA

One Community Social Helper is selected among villagers, and one Child Protection Focal Point is selected among the members of the Village Development Committee, a body elected by the village. Both the Community Social Helper and the Child Protection Focal Point undergo a two-week training, during which they learn about child rights, how to identify and assess children at risk and how to help children. They also learn to develop strategies for prevention, early intervention and referral. Once trained, they call a village meeting to explain to villagers their role and that of the network. The only compensation they receive for their work is a

bicycle and per diem during training and case conferences.

Posters are used to generate discussion and are displayed in public places. Social Helpers hold regular village meetings and conduct house visits. They also collect contributions from the community for the Child Village Social Fund, which helps develop interventions, including negotiating school fee waivers for out-of-school children and providing school supplies, medical care or counselling.

Fifty-one villages have established Child Village Social Funds. UNICEF matches 40 per cent of their contributions.

Each month, all Child Protection Focal Points and Community Social Helpers of the same commune (there are around 10 to 15 villages per commune), as well as the other trained network members, participate in a case conference facilitated by the Provincial Social Affairs staff in charge of the

programme. This provides an opportunity for the village volunteers to make referrals, obtain assistance from other network members on cases they were not able to solve within the community, receive further training, discuss new issues and share experiences.

During the first year, Community Social Helpers interviewed 6,692 children. Nearly half of these children were identified as being at risk – out of school; from families with domestic violence, gambling or alcoholism problems; from broken or second marriage families, from families with internal disputes; or from very poor families.

Among the 3,000 children identified as at risk:

- 59 per cent received counselling;
- 44 per cent of their families received counselling; and
- 41 per cent who had not been attending school were able to return to school.

# SOLWODI

## Giving girls a second chance

**G**anjoni is a well-known neighbourhood in Mombasa, Kenya's major port on the Indian Ocean. Local commuter taxis, trucks and cars crowd the main streets. Schools, bars, a restaurant, shops, a health clinic and a petrol station are tucked between residential blocks. Kiosks selling fruits, vegetables and second-hand clothes are everywhere.

The black-and-white signpost that hangs outside the building housing SOLWODI is easy to miss. The few who know the place refer to it as *nyumba ya malaya* (the house of prostitutes). SOLWODI, however, stands for Solidarity with Women in Distress, an NGO started in 1985 by a Roman Catholic nun who wanted to give women, and especially young girls involved in prostitution, an alternative life.

Worsening economic conditions have left families across Kenya struggling to pay school fees and for even the most basic necessities. HIV/AIDS has further weakened family structures – a report published in 2000 by the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) puts the number of orphans left to fend for themselves at 730,000 in 1999. Finally, a culture that has always treated women as second-class citizens is fuelling the sexual exploitation of girls. Today, there are even fewer alternatives for survival.

### A runaway is lured into sex work

Caroline left school last year at 16, taking the train to Mombasa, some 800 kilometres from her Nakuru home. The town has a thriving commercial sex industry that attracts customers from around the country and beyond. An orphan, Caroline was eager to leave cruel relatives. A young woman spotted Caroline as she got off the train and invited her home. Caroline, who didn't know anybody at the seaside city, went with her.

Caroline soon found herself being 'trained' in sex work in some of the city's well-known clubs. "We worked in groups, with an older girl negotiating with clients," says Caroline. "Men would ask our ages and the younger the better. I would then go with the man to a lodging where we would have sex. I paid a commission to the group leader for every client. Some of the men would beat me, especially when I refused to take drugs or if I insisted on using a condom." In one such incident, the

“I wasn’t worried or frightened at all at first. My brother, sister and I were all playing in the garden. Then he came out to join us.

At some point my sister and brother went inside, but only for a short time. When my sister came back, I realized that something was wrong, because he pushed me under a bush out of sight of my sister. When she asked for me, he told her to go away.”

– 8-year-old Cambodian girl,  
describing being raped by a family friend

man insisted they both smoke *bhang* before going to bed. Caroline refused. He beat her, tore her clothes off and put them in water. She walked home dripping wet.

An older girl told Caroline about SOLWODI and she started attending the regular Monday afternoon meetings. Caroline is now waiting to train as a hairdresser. She hopes to support herself as well as pay for schooling for her two younger sisters. “Now I know I was being exploited for my body,” says Caroline. “Even though the men picked me because I was young, some would use this as an excuse not to pay. They would argue I was a child anyway and not supposed to be in commercial sex work, so why should they pay me?”

Caroline believes SOLWODI saved her life. “Now there is a life for me,” she says. “They have the courage to speak out against the exploitation of young girls and to support those like me.” Caroline hopes to help other girls quit.

## Reaching out to girls

SOLWODI is staffed by a manager, Lorna Rupia, and four social workers. Fifteen trained peer educators reach out to commercial sex workers in nightclubs, beach hotels and the streets, educating them about the alternative life and support that SOLWODI can provide. The police, the probation office and other NGOs also refer girls to SOLWODI.

A majority of SOLWODI clients are high-risk teenage girls whom peer educators or neighbours have identified as “just about to enter” or “in the early stages” of commercial sex work. These 15- to 20-year-old young women are often school drop-outs from poor families and get into commercial sex work through ‘boyfriends’ who pay them for sex. Many of the girls have dropped out of school because they can’t pay their school fees, and they become involved in commercial sexual exploitation because they need money to buy clothes or food, supplement family income or escape forced early marriages.

When a girl comes to SOLWODI, the NGO does not demand that she immediately stop commercial sex work. “We cannot provide them with an instant alternative, and they tell us openly that they will not stop unless they get another source of income,” says Ms. Rupia.

At SOLWODI, girls meet other girls whose lives have changed. “We only work with girls who make a choice to leave

commercial sex work,” says social worker Fridah Mwadime. “We help these girls make this choice through education and counselling – many of the girls do not realize they are being exploited. A majority do not like what they have to do but they feel they have no choice.”

When girls register with SOLWODI, the social workers help them begin their new life. Through individual and group counselling, home visits and regular education around issues such as HIV/AIDS, drug abuse, women’s rights and how to fight for those rights, the girls begin to understand the exploitative nature of commercial sex work. “The girls should have adequate negotiating skills and be able to make better choices,” says Ms. Rupia. “They understand that sex without a condom means getting infected, possibly with HIV/AIDS.”

Vocational training is given to those aged 25 years and younger. The girls learn tie-dyeing, baking, tailoring and hairdressing. “When a girl identifies the skill she would like to specialize in, we help in identifying the schools,” says Ms. Mwadime. “These should be institutions that will support the girl’s decision to stop commercial sex work. The courses are usually six months to one year long, and can cost up to Ksh 15,000” (\$192). SOLWODI pays for the courses. The student and her guardian sign an agreement to repay this amount according to mutually agreed terms, but, says Ms. Rupia, allowances are made and, given the job market in Kenya, there is no penalty if the girls cannot repay the fees.

Most of the girls who come to SOLWODI need significant emotional healing. “These girls are so withdrawn, submissive and subdued that they put up with anything in the course of their ‘work’,” says Ms. Mwadime. “These are young girls to whom anything can be done by their male clients, but they submit to make money. Some will have unprotected sex when a client demands it. Others will be involved in violent group sex. At SOLWODI we try to make them get out of such submissiveness. We try to instil confidence and respect in them. These children simply need education and a supportive environment.”

Saida dropped out of school at age 15 to take care of her terminally ill mother, who died last year. Her father sells coffee on the streets, which pays for a single room that he shares with his four younger children. Saida and one of her sisters sleep in the landlady’s house. “I feed the family by cooking and selling beans in the evenings, which local people eat as stew,” says Saida. “But this is not enough, and sometimes there is not enough to eat.”

Before her mother died, a young man in the neighbourhood had shown interest in Saida. Although she used to ignore him, when one night the family went without food, Saida asked him for money. He said he could give her money as long as she slept with him. “He gives me 300 to 500 shillings when I sleep with him, and this helps. But I worry about diseases since I know he is sleeping with other women.”

Saida first heard about SOLWODI at a women’s meeting she attended. She is eager to start on her hairdressing course and hopes to one day put her sisters, aged 7, 12 and 13, back in school.

## **The community must work together**

With a declining economy and the absence of any social safety net for children when parents die, Ms. Rupia fears that the NGO will be seeing more and more sexual exploitation of children. “We must work harder to find employment opportunities for the girls or find resources that will support them in self-employment,” says Ms. Rupia. “The community and the government must work harder to keep children out of commercial sex.”

Some members of the community are doing their part. Many of the local chiefs and village-level administrators invite SOLWODI to their public meetings to inform the local communities about their work. And Ms. Rupia, who previously worked as a probation officer, believes SOLWODI’s work will be supported by the Children’s Bill, which attempts to bring

# IMPACT OF ARMED CONFLICT ON THE SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

Armed conflict is horrific for all, but for women and children it also poses special risks of sexual violence and exploitation, including rape, torture, mutilation and sexual slavery.

In a February 2001 ruling, the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY), meeting in The Hague, determined that, in times of war, rape can be considered a crime against humanity. The Tribunal ruled that three Bosnian Serbs were guilty of the systematic and savage rape, torture and enslavement of Muslim women in 1992, in the town of Foca in eastern Bosnia, and sentenced each man to jail terms of up to 28 years.

Often, when military troops are stationed away from their communities – in times of war and peace – the balance of power between men and women becomes increasingly unequal. The concentration of large numbers of men can lead to the widespread exploitation of women and girls.

**GIRLS AS 'WIVES' OR CAMP SLAVES:** Unaccompanied girls are often captured by military and civilian men alike and used either as forced labourers by families in need of domestic workers or as 'wives'. In Sierra Leone, it is believed that as

many as 10,000 females may have been abducted, mostly from the rural areas, to serve the rebel Revolutionary United Front (RUF). Others were 'donated' by relatives. Their primary role was to provide domestic and sexual services. Rape and gang sex were widespread in the military camps. In East Timor, according to a report by a leading women's aid organization, militia members and soldiers connived "to abduct women or share them like chattel, or in some cases forcibly take women across the border into West Timor where the women were raped daily and made to perform household chores."

**PROSTITUTION:** Poverty, hunger and desperation arising from war may force women and children into prostitution, obliging them to offer sex for food or shelter, for safe conduct through the war zone or in exchange for papers for themselves and their families. In Colombia, girls as young as 12 submitted themselves to paramilitary forces to defend their families. In Liberia, a recent study found that children as young as 10 were being sexually exploited by soldiers at military bases. In the Philippines, tourists and military troops are believed to comprise about 40 per cent of the country's sex exploiters. In Thailand, the domestic sex industry expanded significantly after the 1950s, in part because of the military personnel who went there for rest and relaxation during the Korean and Viet Nam wars.

**REFUGEES AND INTERNALLY DISPLACED:** Approximately 80 per

cent of the world's 35 million internally displaced and refugees are women and children. Women and girl refugees and asylum seekers are vulnerable to demands for sex by border guards, police officers, military personnel and camp officials. In two refugee camps in Guinea, Human Rights Watch interviewed Sierra Leonean refugee girls as young as 12 years of age, who said they felt they had to "play sex for money" (work as child prostitutes). In refugee camps in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, it has been reported that numerous girls have been pressured by their families to enter prostitution.

**SPREAD OF HIV/AIDS:** The breakdown in social structures and legal protection that accompanies conflict creates an environment where sexual relationships easily become violent, exploitative and transitory, involving a greater number of partners. Rape, sexual slavery, trafficking and forced marriages increase, and young people become sexually active at an earlier age. Health infrastructure is destroyed. Furthermore, military personnel often lack knowledge about preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS and have higher rates of HIV than the population at large. In Tanzania, the infection rate in the armed forces is between 15 and 30 per cent, compared with 8 per cent in the general population. In Zimbabwe and Cameroon, military HIV-infection rates are three to four times higher than in the civilian population in peacetime.

## SEXUAL ABUSE: A shameful secret

The most hidden and underreported form of violence against children is sexual abuse. And because children who have been sexually abused are at heightened risk of being drawn into the commercial sex trade, it can be doubly damaging.

Sexual abuse can occur in any family, but the risks are greater when a mother is ill or absent, when there is overcrowding and lack of privacy, unemployment or parental drug or alcohol abuse. Children are sexually abused by members of their family or extended family, and by family friends, neighbours, teachers, employers, caregivers and classmates. Both boys and girls are victims.

In most cases, the sexual abuse of children never comes to the attention of authorities. There may be no physical signs of harm, but there is always intense shame. Secrecy is often maintained, even by adults who know of the abuse, for fear of destroying a family. The abusers often make the child afraid to tell.

Children who have been sexually abused may be withdrawn, moody, anxious, depressed, self-destructive and sometimes suicidal. They may also become emotionally numb. A child who is the victim of prolonged sexual abuse usually develops low self-esteem and an abnormal perspective on sexuality. Some children have difficulty relating to others except in sexual terms. Some become abusers themselves, or prostitutes. Girls who have been abused are significantly more likely than their non-abused peers to become pregnant before age 18. Many children develop learning problems and drop out of school. Some may use drugs to numb themselves.

Sexually abused children are prime targets for exploiters. A 1999 UNICEF-supported study on sexual exploitation in Costa Rica revealed that 83 per cent of boys and close to 79 per cent of girls interviewed reported sexual abuse before their 12th birthday. Of the total population studied, 48 per cent were involved in commercial sexual activity at approximately 12 years of age or earlier. Nearly 60 per cent of the study group said that they drank alcohol and smoked crack cocaine on a daily basis. Nearly 55 per cent reported daily marijuana use, 53 per cent abused pills and approximately 20 per cent sniffed glue.

Often, children who have been sexually exploited are further victimized by those who are supposed to protect them. If a child has been trafficked and is rescued or escapes, that child may be detained, deported, harassed or exploited by enforcement officers. Ostracized by their family and community, many children can never go home again. If they have AIDS, the stigma and isolation will be worse. A child's innocence can never be recovered, and the road back to becoming a productive member of society can be a long one. Preventing the abuse and exploitation of children must become a global priority.

national legislation in line with the Convention on the Rights of the Child. At the time of publication the bill is in Parliament and is expected to be passed before the end of 2001. Ms. Rupia hopes other organizations that can support the girls and women, including the police, will take on some of the responsibilities that her organization cannot handle.

In June 2001, SOLWODI had registered 85 young girls, but there are many more who need assistance. “The social workers had to cut down on street work when we realized that we could not meet the demand,” says Ms. Rupia. “We do not have the resources, human or financial. We hope that as we raise more funds and as our clients are able to repay their loans, we will be able to enlist more girls.”

Sixteen-year-old Rose was fortunate to meet SOLWODI when she did. Her mother sells vegetables to support Rose and two other children. But there is not enough money to buy food for everyone, and some days there is no food at all. Rose would like things her friends have – nice clothes and nicely styled hair. So when a friend asked her for sex in return for money, she agreed. Soon she was taking money from more than just her ‘boyfriend’. A neighbour noticed that Rose was staying out late. “She told me she had noticed that I had started bad habits. She asked me to go to SOLWODI. I am glad to find an organization like this one. My brief time as a commercial sex worker was far from happy. I was afraid of getting pregnant or getting AIDS. The men are also not good. Some do not pay; others are abusive, while some push you to take drugs. One man suggested that if I took drugs I would not think that what I was doing was bad or wrong.”

Rose is looking forward to her embroidery course. She is also happy that since she stopped going out to bars and discos, she has a better relationship with her 12-year-old sister. “I had lost her respect completely,” said Rose. “She believed I would come home with AIDS. Now it is my turn to tell her that she should never ever think of selling her body for money.” ▼

## CYBERTIPLINE TARGETS CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

When a mother in Montana (United States) discovered that her 16-year-old daughter had run away from home, she logged onto the Internet and reported her disappearance on the National Center for Missing Children’s (NCMEC) CyberTipline. The mother suspected that her daughter had taken a bus to Kansas City, Missouri, to visit an adult she ‘met’ via the Internet. NCMEC’s Exploited Child Unit contacted the Federal

Bureau of Investigation (FBI), which contacted its Kansas City office. When the young girl arrived in Kansas City, federal agents greeted her. The suspect, a divorced male in his thirties, was also apprehended.

NCMEC’s CyberTipline ([www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com)) enables individuals to report, with a click of a button, the possession, manufacture and distribution of child pornography; online enticement of children for sexual acts; child prostitution; and child sex tourism. Each report is reviewed by analysts and forwarded to law enforcement offices, including the FBI, the US Customs Service, the US Postal Inspection Service and state and local police agencies. Between

its launch in March 1998 and the end of April 2001, NCMEC has received and processed more than 40,000 leads through its CyberTipline.

NCMEC is a national resource centre and clearinghouse that helps locate and recover missing children as well as raise public awareness to prevent the abduction, molestation, sexual exploitation and victimization of children. NCMEC provides a 24-hour toll-free multilingual telephone hotline (1-800-THE-LOST) for callers to report the location of missing children or to obtain assistance when a child is missing. The hotline averages 587 calls a day.



# Dominican Republic

## First but necessary steps

**A**t high noon off-season, there are few tourists in the warm Caribbean water in Boca Chica, a popular beach resort in the Dominican Republic. The main street is unusually quiet, except for some boys who come to the beach after school to make pocket money. Dressed in dirty shirts and shorts and worn shoes, they stop to talk with a young man who works with children and adolescents at risk.

“There are tourists who come up to us and want us to go with them to have sex, but we say no,” says 12-year-old Jorge, who makes between 200 and 300 pesos (\$12 to \$18) a day, mainly shining shoes.

Jorge says that a day earlier, one of his friends had gone with a tourist. When he returned, he had \$7 in his pocket. Jorge asked him what he had done to get the money and the boy said he had taken the tourist to the shops. But Jorge and the other boys didn’t believe him. Eventually, the boy admitted that the tourist had used him for sex.

A few minutes later, that same boy who had left with the tourist joins the group. He is quiet; his head is down. He looks no older than 10.

In the Dominican Republic, in massage parlours, clubs and the *casas de chicas*, as such places are called, “business is booming,” according to one tourist guidebook. The industry sells sex and has turned both boys and girls across the island into merchandise.

“Don’t speak badly about the tourists,” yells a man in his 20s, who works as a motor scooter driver, shuttling tourists around the area. “We make our living from them. The tourists aren’t the problem. The problem is the children and the parents of the children who let them stay on the street.”

The man’s reaction is common. “They blame the families and the children, not the abuser,” says Elisa Sánchez, Director of the Office of Children and Families of the Attorney General’s Office. “But that’s starting to change.”

The change can’t come soon enough. A 1994 study on the commercial sexual exploitation of children, which looked at four areas (Boca Chica, Puerto Plata, Santo Domingo and Sosua), estimated that there were more than 25,000 children under 18 involved in sexual activities for money in the Dominican Republic. Both girls (64 per cent) and boys (36 per cent) were exploited.

Although the study indicated that a significant number of adolescents were involved in traditional prostitution – in brothels and clubs where clients, mainly Dominican, purchased their services through an intermediary – it also

**“We worked in groups, with an older girl negotiating with clients. Men would ask our ages and the younger the better. I would then go with the man to a lodging where we would have sex. I paid a commission to the group leader for every client. Some of the men would beat me, especially when I refused to take drugs or if I insisted on using a condom.”**

**–16-year-old Caroline, former sex worker in Mombasa, Kenya**

documented a ‘new’ type of prostitution involving children engaged in sexual activities with adults whom they met on beaches, on streets and in restaurants. The children became involved in prostitution around age 12 on average; their exploiters were mainly foreigners. Ninety per cent of the clients were men, although women also preyed on young boys: About 55 per cent of the boys in the Puerto Plata sex trade had their last sexual encounter with a woman.

Today, 1.5 million tourists visit the Dominican Republic each year. On the Internet, a number of sex guides with names like “Dominican Delight Erotic Vacations” market “hot blooded” women and an “anything goes” attitude. Both boys and girls are exploited.

## **New laws to secure women’s and children’s rights**

In 1994, Law 14-94, the Code for the Protection of Children and Adolescents, was enacted. Based on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, it contains provisions against child abuse, including physical and emotional maltreatment, sexual exploitation and child labour, and provides for removal of a mistreated or delinquent child to a protective environment.

In 1997, a new criminal law, no. 24-97, prescribed penalties for violence against women, family abuse, sexual assaults, procuring and trafficking in women and desertion of the family. Persons found guilty of sexual abuse of a minor are also subject to a penalty of 10 to 20 years in jail and a fine of 110,000 to 215,000 pesos (\$6,600 to \$13,200), and up to 30 years in jail if the victim is a family member of the abuser. Procuring a child for the purposes of prostitution is punishable by six months’ to three years’ imprisonment and a fine of 50,000 to 500,000 pesos (\$3,000 to \$31,000).

Last year, prosecutors discovered that a mother in Santo Domingo had been advertising the sexual services of her two 12-year-old daughters. “Before Law 24-97, there was nothing we could have done to deal with the mother in the court system,” says Ms. Sánchez. “It was not a crime.”

## **Training judges**

For laws to be effective, judges need to be knowledgeable. “When the new legislation against family violence came out, many of the judges thought the law was too harsh,” says Luis Henry Molina, Director of the National School of Judges, responsible

for training the country's 576 judges and 4,500 employees of the judicial system. In 2000, 138 family judges received 12 hours of training in domestic violence issues.

"After the training, we saw a major difference in their attitudes," says Mr. Molina. "They now understand that there is inequality between men and women in the country and they also understand how a personal problem translates into a public health issue." According to a report by the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, violence is the sixth leading cause of death of women in the Dominican Republic.

## **Preventing child abuse becomes a national priority**

Family violence is one of the most serious problems affecting women and children in the Dominican Republic. It is also one of the most underreported crimes because of beliefs that family problems should be dealt with inside the family. Says Carmen Rosa Hernández of the Department of Children, Adolescence and Family of the Supreme Court, "A family with problems, where the father abuses the mother or the children, creates a situation that forces children to leave the house and go to the street, where they become sexually exploited."

In 1998, a national campaign, 'The Country We Want: Giving children a voice', was launched to educate people about the harmful effects of child abuse and sexual exploitation. Thirty thousand public schoolteachers were given training on children's rights, and these concepts were integrated into the primary and middle school curricula. In tourist areas, posters in English, French, German, Italian and Spanish were put up in restaurants and hotels, warning: "Physical, sexual, psychological abuse against children and teenagers is considered a crime punishable with imprisonment of 2-5 years and fines from RD\$5,000 to 15,000 pesos [\$312 to \$937]."

A toll-free hotline was established to provide information and educational and emergency services on child abuse and sexual exploitation nationwide. Nearly 100 college students were trained to serve as volunteer hotline operators. The largest telephone company in the country donated the telephone system, network and computers. The monthly telephone charge was financed by the First Lady. Fifteen thousand flyers and 50,000 booklets about the child abuse hotline and prevention messages were distributed.

A presidential decree declared April Child Abuse Prevention Month. The decree called for all public institutions, government organizations and the private sector to coordinate and develop activities to fight against child abuse. In April 2001, flyers were distributed and posters were put up in communities around the country in schools, offices and supermarkets: "When you abuse a child, they are chained for the rest of their life. Help to break the chain. Don't tolerate any kind of child abuse." Newspapers and television programmes explained different kinds of physical, sexual and psychological abuse, the damage that they cause and how to detect signs of abuse.

"Before, people felt it was OK for husbands to hit their wives," says Luis Veras Jiménez, Technical Executive Director of the Governing Body for the Protection of Children and Adolescents. "Now they understand that it's not OK. They are also aware that sexual abuse and exploitation damages children. We're talking about changing the culture of abuse to tolerance and respect. It's a process and it takes time."

In January 2000, the Technical Secretariat of the Governing Body for the Protection of Children and Adolescents finalized a national plan against the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. In November 2000, the Dominican Republic ratified ILO Convention 182 on the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour. It is in the process

of ratifying the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography. Also, the newly created Inter-Institutional Commission for the Eradication of Commercial Sexual Exploitation began meeting in March 2001.

## A good beginning

The steps taken to stop the sexual exploitation of children in the Dominican Republic are a good beginning: The silence has been broken on the issue of family violence and there is a growing understanding about the damage caused by physical, emotional and sexual abuse of children. Laws are also in place.

Yet it is still far too soon to tell whether the country will succeed in halting the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Institutions responsible for creating and implementing policies have yet to coordinate their efforts, and no funding has been allocated.

And while the laws are significant, prosecuting offenders has not been easy. "There is a long chain of people involved – taxi drivers, hotel people, the client, the tour operator, the bar owner – and the law as written is too vague and needs to more

## BREAKING THE CYCLE

In a brothel in Mumbai (India), 22-year-old Asmita lies on a bunk bed in a windowless room, waiting for clients. Her five-year-old daughter, standing nearby in a narrow hallway littered with garbage, calls out to her. Asmita sits up and slips on her shoes. It is almost six o'clock and the brothel will soon be busy.

When night falls, Asmita takes her daughter to a crèche down the street. The night crèche, opened in 1989 by Prerana, a local non-governmental organization (NGO), provides the children of Kamathipura, one of Mumbai's largest red-light districts, with a bath, food, toys and a safe place to sleep.

Before the crèche opened, older

children who lived in the brothels were sent out to the streets to fend for themselves for the night. Younger children were fed and lightly drugged so they would sleep and not disturb the customers. The children seldom attended school. Girls usually ended up following in their mother's footsteps and working in the brothel; boys were recruited as pimps. "We thought if we could get the young children out of the brothels, they would have a chance at a better life," says Priti Patkar, founder of Prerana.

In 2000, about 80 children, two to six years old, were brought to the crèche every night and collected by their mothers by 9 the next morning.

Recognizing that education is critical to preventing children who live in the brothels from becoming

exploited themselves, Prerana works to get children into school and also offers literacy classes and vocational training for older children who have difficulty coping with the formal educational system.

Prerana is actively involved not only in preventing a new generation of children from being exploited but also in assisting the women who are already in the brothels. The NGO educates the women on their rights and provides those who want to leave the brothels with support and assistance.

"It's easier for us to reach the women though their children," says Ms. Patkar. "It's difficult for many of them to stand up for themselves, because their lives are so controlled. But we find that they will fight for the rights of their children."

clearly define these players,” says Ms. Sánchez, who also notes that Law 24-97 is under review and is expected to be modified to facilitate prosecution.

Furthermore, the police are not well trained. “Training the judges doesn’t matter if the system isn’t working,” says Mr. Molina. “It’s the job of the police to collect evidence and the prosecutors to bring the cases to trial. For the system to work, it has to function at all levels.” (In June 2000, the National School of Judges conducted trainings with police, prosecutors and judges on the issue of commercial sexual exploitation.)

Ms. Sánchez agrees. “The children become the only physical proof to make the case. It’s the child’s word against the defendant. If you can afford a good lawyer, it’s easy to get off.” One foreigner who had been arrested paid the family of the girl he had allegedly exploited. The case was dropped.

There are also no national policies or mechanisms in place to care for children who have been removed from exploitative situations. The toll-free Child Abuse Hotline played an important role in educating the public about child abuse, but because there is no system to address the needs of children reported to be abused, the hotline is temporarily out of service. The Technical Secretariat of the Governing Body for the Protection of Children and Adolescents and the Institute of the Family are working on reinstating the hotline with improved service.

Finally, says Mr. Molina, “There are a lot of people who don’t want to eliminate the problem because it brings them money.”

The challenges are formidable. “The society is in the process of understanding that commercial sexual exploitation is a problem in our country,” says Henry Pimentel, Executive Director of the Association for Tourist Development in Boca Chica. “It’s a process and it takes time, but we need everyone to understand that this is their community. They need to understand that a child being abused can be their son or daughter.” ▼

## SIGNS OF PROGRESS

**In Mexico**, 30 organizations, including city and state officials, police, representatives of bars and cantinas, the taxi drivers' union, the media and the parents association in the state of Quintana Roo, have joined to launch a campaign against all forms of child abuse. Taxi drivers have placed stickers on their cars that warn: "Don't mess with our children." Posters, T-shirts, newspapers and radio and television ads raise awareness about the problem of sexual exploitation and publicize a toll-free number for reporting cases of child abuse.

**In Teresina**, the capital city of Brazil's north-eastern state, Piaui, Projeto Casa de Zabele provides psychological, social and educational support to girls 9 to 16 years old who have been sexually abused or who are at risk of abuse. In 2000, 104 girls from 87 families participated in the project, which encouraged discussions on how to prevent and address sexual abuse, domestic violence and child labour. Most of the participating girls were abused at home, although 20 per cent were involved in an operation in the busy central plaza of the city, where they sold coffee and procured clients.

**On the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City in Viet Nam**, the Rose Warm Shelter cares for sexually abused Vietnamese girls, some of whom have been rescued from Cambodian brothels. Girls may stay at the shelter for six months to two years. They receive psychological support, medical care, educational instruction and vocational training. When appropriate, girls are eventually reunited with their families. If they can't return home, they are helped to live on their own. The shelter cares for approximately 35 girls at one time.

**In Nepal**, the Centre for Legal Research and Resource Development (CeLRRD) has strengthened paralegal and community-surveillance systems in communities in 14 districts. Over 5,000 women have received paralegal training, which has resulted in the formation of a network of 165 paralegal committees, which liaise with the police, legal advisers and committees at the district and community level to help reduce trafficking in their villages and rescue girls who are about to be sold. Police have also been trained in investigating and processing trafficking cases more effectively, and women and children cells – specialized units within the police stations that deal with women's and children's cases – have been established in 14 district police offices in districts where trafficking in children is common.

**In Thailand**, UNICEF and the Pan Pacific Hotel in Bangkok initiated the Youth Career Development Programme (YCDP) in 1995, which provides five months of job training in hotel work for girls and young women from poor rural families. The girls also learn life skills, such as how to open a bank account, fill out job applications, conduct interviews and make public presentations. They are also given basic sex education, including on the transmission of HIV/AIDS. English language classes are provided every morning. There are now 18 participating hotels, including the the Siam Intercontinental, Holiday Inn, Hyatt, Marriott, Novotel (Accor Group), Peninsula, Regent, Shangri-La, Sheraton and Westin. Most of the girls who participate in the programme get full-time jobs in upscale hotels in Bangkok. Some choose to return home to work in early child development centres or hotels in their provinces. In 2000, a private hospital offered to provide three additional months of training in nursing for those interested. All who received training in the hospital are working as nurse's assistants. Their regular income has made it possible for many of them to enrol in open universities to pursue higher education.

\$7.95  
ISBN: 92-806-3733-9  
Sales no: E.01.XX.14

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Website: [www.unicef.org](http://www.unicef.org)

November 2001

