

VOICES OF YOUTH  
WWW.UNICEF.ORG/VOY/  
NO.3 | FEBRUARY 03

# WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE ARE SAYING

## COMMERCIAL SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

For every child  
Health, Education, Equality, Protection  
ADVANCE HUMANITY



### New on *Voices of Youth*

- ❖ [Fight HIV/AIDS](#): In order to better address the pandemic of HIV/AIDS, *Voices of Youth* launched its new HIV/AIDS module, including a case study, the 10 basic facts, and the ABC's of prevention. **Join the discussion!**
- ❖ [Chat & Discussion Board Summaries](#): This month, *Voices of Youth* made available summaries of VoY-hosted chats and discussion boards over the past years compiled over the past years.
- ❖ [Voices Online Journal](#): *Voices of Youth* began its online journal with a request to the under-18 delegates of the Special Session on Children to write about their post-Session experiences. **Read what delegates are writing!**
- ❖ [Discussion board for Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children](#): After being hosted by the Youth Rights discussion board for over a year, the commercial sexual exploitation discussion finally has its own board!

### Spotlight

- ❖ [Intergenerational Dialogue](#): In collaboration with the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW), *Voices of Youth* has developed a module on communication between young people and adults, including an overview of intergenerational dialogue, a case study, and discussion points. **Join in the discussion!**

### Upcoming on *Voices of Youth*

- ❖ [Water & Sanitation Chats](#): *Voices of Youth* will host multiple chats to help delegates of the Third World Water Forum in Tokyo get ready.
- ❖ [Glossary](#): *Voices of Youth* is in the process of building a glossary of child rights related terms.
- ❖ [HIV/AIDS information](#): In collaboration with UNICEF experts, *Voices of Youth* will begin providing additional information and resources on the HIV discussion board as a response to young people's questions.

### Quotation of the Month

*"Although none of my close relations have HIV/AIDS, the statistics are astounding and it pains me to think that my generation is so ignorant, that none of us take our lives seriously enough to protect it...I live in Southern Africa. I don't want to die before i'm 110 with 5 great-grandchildren I dont want to die before i turn 25. I refuse to sit down and watch my generation fall to pieces. I am going to make a difference....will you?? "*

(young girl, 15, Zimbabwe)

**April Topic** Water, Environment & Sanitation

### Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

In December 2001, in conjunction with the Yokohama conference, *Voices of Youth* began a discussion on the commercial sexual exploitation of children. More than a year later, and on the eve of the Tokyo conference on trafficking, this discussion board remains one of the most active and dynamic on *Voices of Youth*.

*Voices of Youth* informs this discussion with

- ❖ An overview of the issue
- ❖ Two cases studies
- ❖ Relevant definitions

Over the past year, the more than 300 messages came from approximately 85 countries from all regions. Over half the messages were from young people above 15 years of age, with just under 50% submitted by English speakers.

### Overview

Young people expressed compassion for young girls and boys who are sexually exploited, and outrage that the sex trade continues to flourish—in all regions of the world, both rich and poor.

Participants discussed commercial sexual exploitation explicitly, as well as addressed related issues such as sexual abuse, pornography, violence and discrimination

Young people devoted much of the discussion to answering the question: What factors give rise to the commercial sexual exploitation of children? Of the many factors identified, young people focused primarily on the following three:

- ❖ Poverty
- ❖ Lack of proper education
- ❖ Ineffective legal frameworks

Participants in the discussion called on their leaders, their communities, their families and their peers to stop sexual exploitation of children, both individually and through partnerships.

Most notably, young people demanded that the silence around commercial sexual exploitation be broken. They asked that young people be heard, that families join in intergenerational dialogues, that governments provide support to foster awareness, and that the media draw attention to this issue.

Following is a brief summary.

**For more information, contact: Amber Oliver, Coordinator, [voy@unicef.org](mailto:voy@unicef.org)**

## Topics

[Poverty](#)

[Education & The School](#)

[Cultural Norms](#)

[Family](#)

[Legal Framework](#)

[Impacts on Children](#)

[What Can Leaders Do?](#)

[What Can Young People Do?](#)

[Conclusion](#)

## Poverty

Almost all the young people on *Voices of Youth* linked commercial sexual exploitation to poverty. They explained that "poor families, especially in developing countries, are often forced to traffic their children in order fulfill their most basic needs". (young girl, >21, Benin)

*"All this could be traced to the poverty that is so evident in this part of the world. Here, survival is the main concern. Others, such as education, a good future, human dignity etc. take a back seat. This could all end when poverty has been defeated."*

young boy, 20, The Philippines

**Family size:** In addition to linking poverty to economic concerns, many young people also considered family size in their discussions of poverty.

*"...certain parents n'arrivant plus à subvenir aux besoins mêmes fondamentaux de leur enfants déjà très nombreux pour leur revenu salarial, trouvent la solution dans une telle pratique."*

young girl, >21, Benin

- ✓ Young people called for more jobs and other economic opportunities for the poor. They also called specifically for jobs for sex workers. (young boy, 16, Sierra Leone)

## Education & The School

As with many of the discussions on *Voices of Youth*, young people focused on education as a means of empowering young people. Within this context participants felt education to be critical to the struggle to end sexual exploitation of children.

Participants stated that an education provides young people with:

- ✓ critical information about child rights
- ✓ life skills necessary to negotiate difficult situations, such as how to say "No" (young girl, >21, Colombia)

- ✓ experience and skills (literacy) needed for jobs (young boy, 20, India)
- ✓ good self esteem needed for independence (young girl, 16, The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland)

*"I believe that education is such an important thing for young people because it gives us not only knowledge but also self esteem and the means to be independent (in thought and in action)."*

young girl, 18, Australia

**The School:** Young people also discussed the intrinsic value of the school environment and attending classes. Staying in school was explicitly linked with preventing early marriage. It was also seen as a credential that opened the door to employment and other opportunities.

- ✓ *"...the government needs to take action in keeping kids in school. There should be a law about minimum age for marriage to prevent things like this."* (young girl, 14, USA)

## Cultural Norms

Young people also discussed the role of cultural and societal norms in perpetuating commercial sexual exploitation.

**Child Labour:** Particularly young people from West and Central Africa felt that the cultural tradition of enlisting the help of children in times of need indirectly promoted commercial sexual exploitation in some communities.

*"Les facteurs qui expliquent le cursus de Thonglin [case study] sont à mon humble avis l'existence d'un réseau de trafiquant d'enfants, les problèmes culturels notamment les traditions selon lesquels les enfants peuvent aider leur famille pauvres."*

young girl, >21, Cameroon

**Gender discrimination:** Young people consistently identified discrimination against girls as central to the discussion of commercial sexual exploitation.

Participants felt that communities sanctioning (directly or indirectly) sexual exploitation lacked respect for women and did not value their girls.

*"Commercial exploitation of children especially young women is a stupid act of someone who doesn't value women who in fact gave us our lives (our mothers)."*

young girl, 17, The Philippines

- ✓ Young people called on the government, the community, the family and "each individual" to

identify and improve their "ethical" traditions as a means of stopping this commercial sexual exploitation. (young girl, >21, Mexico)

## Family

Young people consistently iterated their view of the family as the child's principal protector: Families provide young people with much needed care, guidance, advice and support, both in general and in-kind, and are the "foundation" of our society. (young girl, <21, Kenya)

*"...uno de los motivos es que se perdió uno de los valores más importantes en las Sociedades, LA FAMILIA; La cuál es por excelencia la base de la misma."*

young boy, >21, Argentina

Building on this vision of the family, young people were particularly angered that family members sometimes exploit their own children (a topic raised in both case studies). They saw this as an unforgivable breach of trust.

*"They are her [case study] parents - they must protect their lovely child (especially their only daughter!) from our cruel world and such ugly people like her "husband"! To our mind, it is the fault of her careless and indifferent parents that this poor girl was involved into such awful, inhuman business!"*

young girl, 16, The Russian Federation

**A mother & a father:** Commenting directly on the case studies, young people repeatedly saw the broken family, the divorced or separated family, as rendering children more vulnerable. They discussed the value of both parents, individually and as a unit, to children.

*"...divorce contributed to her [case study] ending up in Thailand. If the parents hadn't split up this wouldn't have happened because when they stick together the child would be protected. If Thonglin was with her biological parents this treatment wouldn't have been given to her and the Auntie seeing that they didn't have any support from anywhere took advantage and sold her."*

young girl, 16, Ghana

**Intergenerational dialogue:** Young people also felt that the difficulty of speaking with parents and other adults about this issue was a factor to be considered.

- ✓ Participants called for intergenerational communication and a breaking of the silence around this issue.

*"creo que la mejor forma de eliminar este mal es con la información y la comunicación de los padres de familia que les hablen que temas que en mexico todavia son tabus, para que no sean engañados los niños."*

young boy, 21, Mexico

## Legal Framework

The need for effective laws that are able to protect young people and punish exploiters was a constant topic of discussion. Young people felt that without a properly functioning, youth-friendly, legal system, commercial sexual exploitation of children would not be curbed.

- ✓ *"It takes the political will power for our politicians (legislature) to enact laws that will not only protect children but will also punish adults who get themselves involved in this dehumanizing act."* (young boy, >21, Ghana)

## Impacts on Children

Participants on *Voices of Youth* demonstrated their clear understanding of the complex nature of commercial sexual exploitation in their varied and sensitive discussion of the negative impacts it can have on a young person, such as:

- ❖ **Preventing young people from reaching their full potential:** *"Young people are the strength of the country they are the future builders, if now onwards they will be exploited than they will never get chance to make the country strong..."* (young boy, 16, Nepal)
- ❖ **Psychological abuse:** *"Commercial sexual expatiation of children can cause severe damage to a child's mental health"*. (young boy, 16, Australia)
- ❖ **Becoming part of a Vicious Cycle:** *"ceci est un cercle infernal tant qu'on les laissera faire il le feront les jeunes garçons ou filles continueront a être exploitée tant que les états ne réagiron pas ils continueront toute leur vie a être exploité ainsi que leur enfant et leurs petits..."* (young girl, 16, France)
- ❖ **Being shunned by the community:** *"Children are innocent victims of adult's pervertation. Later when anything befalls them, they are shunned from society for partaking in an act which they were forced into in the first place."* (young girl, 17, Malaysia)

## What can Leaders Do?

Many suggestions for action were put forth during the discussion. Young people feel strongly that their government, community and family leaders all

have a role to play in the struggle to end commercial sexual exploitation of children.

- ✓ **Break the Silence:** *"In my opinion, the most important thing is that society should [not turn] their back to the problem. They should accept that it exists everywhere even though everyone tries to hide it and few people would accept that it exists in their society. Also, people should start realizing the importance of the problem and that it is not one we can ignore."* (young boy, 16, Greece)
- ✓ **Build Awareness:** *"Government must provide educational projects to prevent illegal child labor, child abuse, child molestation, flaunting or displaying their nude body in the net (in some cases)..."* (young boy, 21, The Philippines)
- ✓ **Intergenerational Dialogue:** *"So many times, the children are doing this because these people threaten them and they are scared to tell someone."* (young girl, 16, USA)
- ✓ **Legal Framework:** *"What is needed are laws to protect young people and institutions to look after them. Governments should report the development and they should be motivated and pushed to work hard by an organization like the United Nations."* (young girl, 15, The Netherlands)
- ✓ **Pressure from the International System:** *"I think institutions like the World Bank should make it a condition that before xxx amount of money is given to you as a loan you must make sure children in your country are living under very good environment. An environment devoid of sexual exploitation, child labour, child soldier and any form of molestation that is against the rights of children."* (young boy, >21, Ghana)

### What Can Young People Do?

Although young people feel that it is very much the responsibility of the wider community to stop commercial sexual exploitation of children, they do see themselves playing an important role in the struggle.

- ✓ **Build life-skills to protect themselves:** *"...pero cuando los niños han sido víctimas de algún tipo de agresión sexual no tienen las habilidades necesarias para defenderse como decir no, expresión de sentimientos, pedir ayuda... Es importante enseñarles a los niños estrategias de afrontamiento ante una situación similar, entrenarles en habilidades sociales."* (young girl, >21, Colombia)

- ✓ **Be considerate and compassionate:** *"Until we keep thinking just about ourselves and forgetting that other's are human as well...this will keep going on."* (young girl, 16, The United Arab Emirates)

*"it's really good to come here [Voices of Youth], read something like this and all of a sudden remember that somewhere in this world someone like me just doesn't have all beautiful aspects of life, but also has to beg everything and everyone in order to survive. Someone like me and even much younger is abused by even her or his own family and how can I dare complaining about little lacks in my life. Shame on me if I do !!! ..."* (young boy, 16, Islamic Republic of Iran)

### Conclusion

Young people clearly understand the complexity of the environment giving rise to commercial sexual exploitation. They recognize it as a global evil, and see that it cannot be prevented by focusing on just one factor, and that no one person, group, or sector can be held responsible for its existence.

- ✓ Young people are calling on the global community to take action and keep them safe. They ask for partnership, collaboration and dedication. They ask to be given the chance to be effective leaders—both today and in the future.