

Sexual exploitation of children across the globe

The use of children (under the age of 18) for the sexual gratification of others is not new. For as long as people have been writing and recording human life, there have been accounts of how adults – usually men but sometimes women – have preyed upon children for pleasure, in the name of religion, to fulfil pathological urges, in an attempt to exploit a relationship of power, or just because they think they can get away with it.

- The 2006 UN Secretary-General's Study on Violence against Children quoted World Health Organization prevalence figures of 150 million girls and 73 million boys under 18 estimated to have experienced forced sexual intercourse or other forms of sexual violence and exploitation involving physical contact;
- Alarmingly, the Violence Study recorded that the most commonly reported perpetrators of sexual violence towards girls are male family members (brothers, uncles), followed by step-fathers, fathers and female family members;
- Sexual violence towards children was also reported to occur in educational settings, with reports of teachers trading grades for sex; and in care and detention institutions, where sexual violence may be used as punishment or to impose power relationships;
- In 2000, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated that 1.8 million children were being sexually exploited in prostitution or pornography;
- In May 2006, the Interpol database of child abuse images contained photographic evidence of more than 20,000 children who had been sexually exploited to produce child pornography, the majority of them new pictures, indicating recent or ongoing cases of exploitation;
- Regional meetings preparing the Violence Study confirmed that forced sex within forced and early marriage is also common in many states. UNICEF reports that an estimated 82 million girls around the world, some as young as 10 years of age, will marry before their 18th birthday.
- The Violence Study found that, on many continents, religious and tribal communities continue to justify the sexual exploitation of children by tribal leaders or priests on ritual, hierarchical or pastoral grounds.

On the public agenda

It was in 1996 that two separate events put the sexual exploitation of children on the public and political agendas.

Worldwide interest in the disappearance of two Belgian eight year-olds, Julie Lejeune and Mélissa Russo, and the discovery of their bodies in August of that year led to the arrest of a convicted rapist, Marc Dutroux and the unfolding of a tale of abduction, abuse and trade in girls for sexual purposes across Europe.

That same month, hundreds of government representatives, UN delegates, child rights activists, researchers, children and young people, and representatives of the world's media were meeting in Stockholm, Sweden, for the first World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children.

In Stockholm, the detail of child sexual exploitation for profit filled in the gaps in public understanding of how people like Dutroux operate and how children all over the world can fall prey to those who seek to use them for sexual gratification or for profit. Delegates to the meeting agreed to a blueprint for action – the *Stockholm Agenda for Action* – and a global commitment and call to arms: the *Stockholm Declaration*.

Since that time, much has been learned about the crimes of sexual exploitation and those who perpetrate them; the factors that put children at risk and how they can be mitigated; the mechanisms, infrastructures and processes that facilitate exploitation and what can be done to dismantle them; and who should be doing what in the global movement to end these heinous violations of children.

In 2001, the 2nd World Congress in Yokohama, Japan, was preceded by a series of regional meetings that resulted in region-specific action plans. Delegates reviewed progress in implementing the Stockholm Agenda for Action and reinforced their commitment through the *Yokohama Global Commitment*.

In 2008 the world will come together again to exchange lessons and experiences, check on progress, reinforce commitments and capacities, and look at forms of sexual exploitation beyond just the commercial forms addressed at earlier Congresses, to strengthen the fight against sexual exploitation of children in all its forms. The World Congress III against the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents will take place from 25 to 28 November in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Crimes of sexual exploitation and those who perpetrate them

The sexual exploitation of children can happen anywhere - in schools, homes, workplaces, in communities and on our computers, and anyone can be an exploiter – a teacher, relative, religious leader, employer, aid worker, peer or pornographer.

Sexual exploitation is defined by either one of two characteristics: the desire for profit or the exploitation of a power relationship between a child and an adult they rely on.

Some adults exploit their relationship with a child for pleasure or control, not for financial profit. Often they are known to the child: family members or friends of the family, teachers, sports coaches or care-givers, including those providing pastoral care.

Paedophiles are those who prey upon children to satisfy a sexual deviance that prompts them to focus their attentions on children below the age of puberty. They often seek out other paedophiles to form clubs or on-line communities where they can feel safe and justify their actions as 'normal'. The internet and the anonymity of mobile technology have provided new safe havens for paedophiles to seek out children, groom them and get close to them, and also to exchange child pornography with like-minded exploiters.

However, others sexually exploit children for profit or enter into a commercial transaction in order to buy sexual services from a child. These people include pimps and brothel owners, and intermediaries such as those working in the entertainment and tourism industries as hotel clerks, tour guides, and bar or restaurant operators. They also include those, often women, who recruit desperate or deceived youngsters into prostitution with the promise of work and a better life and who sell or traffic them into sexual slavery.

Clients who purchase sex from minors are included in this group. Among them are paedophiles who pay to get close to a very young child for sex – sometimes paying a third party but also paying the child her/himself to perform sexual acts. Many sex exploiters, though, are not paedophiles but regular prostitute-users who choose to buy sex from minors. These men often justify their behaviour on the grounds of 'difference', telling

themselves and others that the children are exploitable because they are foreign, prematurely sexually active, perverse or evil.

The phenomenon known as 'child sex tourism' is fuelled by this perverted self-justification, as child sex tourists generally excuse their criminal behaviour on the grounds that 'children in this country like it/do it/are used to it/expect it'.

It is important also not to forget the taxi drivers, transport operators, corrupt law enforcement and migration officials, even those who produce or provide forged or altered documents (for example false or stolen birth certificates to 'prove' that a child is older than s/he is) who profit in one way or another from the sexual exploitation of a child.

Since the advent of the internet and mobile telephone services linked with download and exchange capabilities, the production and sale of child pornography has also become a profitable business. The men who sexually violate or photograph children being violated in order to sell the images are child sex exploiters. So are those who operate the websites that are the shop fronts for the illicit trade in child abuse images.

Also, when someone pays to look at child pornography, they are not just looking, they are exploiting. They are part of the chain of exploitation and, in most countries, are pursued by the law as child sex offenders.

Factors that put children at risk

Many people believe that poverty is the root cause of sexual violence against children and it is true that it is often an important factor in why some children are sexually exploited. However, there are many children living in poverty who do not fall victim to sex exploiters and there must be other factors present for a child to be sexually exploited. In short, poverty is often relevant but not always the determining factor.

This is often called 'poverty plus', where a 'plus' factor combines with poverty to increase the child's vulnerability. Such factors include disruptions in the family, for example the breadwinner falling ill or losing their job, or one or both parents dying of AIDS and leaving children with no adult support, and external factors such as increase in food or fuel costs resulting in higher commodity prices and leaving families economically hard hit. Events such as these, which reduce a family's income and ability to cope, push families to look for ways to survive and signal to those waiting to exploit this vulnerability that the children are ripe for the picking.

Family violence is also a factor in increasing vulnerability because children may run away from a violent home and live on the streets. There, a child's vulnerability to exploitation, violence and trafficking is acute. Many children who enter into the sex trade were sexually exploited first by a relative and this violation was a determining factor in them running away from home and eventually ending up being sexually exploited commercially.

Children who are out of school, because they have never been enrolled or have dropped out, are also at risk because their opportunities are reduced and exploiters are ready to take advantage of this.

The 'Demand' for sex with children

It is important to recognize that the above factors make the child more vulnerable to exploitation, but it is a fact that there are people ready, able and willing to exploit this vulnerability that leads to the crime occurring. In the field of commercial sexual exploitation of children, this has often been summed up as 'demand' for child sex, but demand is a complex concept.

Demand refers not only to the people who purchase sex from a minor but crucially to the people who strive to make a profit from the exploitation. This is rarely the children themselves but rather the pimps, brothel owners, tour operators, traffickers, intermediaries and others who line their pockets with the revenues of exploitation. Sometimes someone in the child's own family is on this list. Demand has to be fully understood and addressed for progress to be made in reducing the sexual exploitation of children.

When it comes to individuals who are exploiting a child sexually for personal gratification rather than profit, the exploitation relates more to issues of power and control and a desire to impose the violator's will by demeaning a child who trusts, cares or feels a duty of respect or obedience to the them. This requires a different understanding and a separate set of actions to confront and overcome.

What can be done?

Many governments do not know how big the problem of sexual exploitation is in their countries. Governments need to invest in assessing the problem. Only things that are measured are budgeted and planned for, and without knowing there can be no effective challenge to this tragic violation of children.

A lot of progress has been made in creating national legislation in countries all over the world dealing with child sexual exploitation. However, not all legislation covers the diverse forms of sexual exploitation. In many countries for example, it is still legal to purchase and view child pornography. However, this demand for child pornography directly contributes to children being sexually exploited in order to film the acts and sell the videos or photos. As a result, those who view child pornography are in effect contributing to the sexual exploitation of children. More needs to be done to bring national laws up to international standards.

Furthermore, the creation of good legislation is only the first step. Effective enforcement of those laws must also be prioritized. Without enforcement, the laws are meaningless. Effective enforcement requires the dedication of resources by governments.

However, the fight against the sexual exploitation of children is not simply won or lost by national laws and enforcement capacities alone; it requires a child protection system which focuses on prevention as well as responding to existing cases and creating a truly protective environment.

By creating a protective environment for children, a country can help prevent sexual exploitation and other forms of violence and exploitation, including hazardous child labour, violence in the home and community, high dropout rates, and child trafficking.

The 2006 UN Secretary General's Study on Violence against Children outlined 12 overarching recommendations¹, which, taken together call for a comprehensive child protection system. Such a system must include a clear and long-term focus on prevention, as well as capacity to respond in situations where exploitation, violence or abuse occurs.

The vision and approach of UNICEF is to create a protective environment, where girls and boys are free from violence, exploitation, and unnecessary separation from family; where laws, services, behaviours and practices minimize children's vulnerability, address risk factors and strengthen children's own resilience.

Child protection systems comprise the set of laws, policies, regulations and services needed across all social sectors — especially social welfare, education, health, security and justice — to support prevention and respond to risks. These systems are part of social protection, and extend beyond it. At the level of prevention, their aim includes supporting and strengthening families to reduce social exclusion, and to lower the risk of separation, violence and exploitation.

Addressing Social Change through open discussion, social norms and the engagement of children themselves is essential to child protection. The process requires strong support from communities and civil society, as well as government over the long term. In practice, these approaches are heavily intertwined: Legislation contributes to changes in social norms (for example, in attitudes towards child labour), and regulations and training aimed at reducing violence and exploitation are more effective when backed by agreement within society.

1. ⁱIn every country, a national strategy, policy or plan of action [against sexual abuse and exploitation of children] with realistic and time-bound targets, and integrated into national planning processes, should be developed and coordinated by an agency that can bring multiple sectors together – *the primary responsibility of government.*
2. Laws and policies to prohibit [sexual abuse and exploitation of children] in all settings – *the responsibility of government.*
3. Prioritizing prevention of violence against children by addressing its underlying causes – *the responsibility of government, supported by UN agencies, NGOs and other advisory and implementing agencies.*
4. Actions to change attitudes that condone, accept and promote [sexual abuse and exploitation of children], including stereotypical gender roles and discrimination...— *the role of government, UN agencies, NGOs and others who influence social attitudes and behaviours, for example the media.*
5. Ongoing training and education for those who work with children to equip them to prevent, detect, and respond to [sexual abuse and exploitation of children] – *the responsibility of all organizations, groups and bodies that work directly with children, including for example professional associations representing teachers or medical practitioners.*
6. Access to child-sensitive, affordable, high quality health and social services and independent legal assistance for children and families who have experienced [sexual abuse and exploitation of children] – *the responsibility of government first (particularly in relation to the resources necessary for these services) with the support of agencies providing victim support.*
7. Active engagement with children and respect for their views in all aspects of prevention, response and monitoring of [sexual abuse and exploitation of children] – *the responsibility of all those who work for and with children, at all levels.*
8. Safe, confidential, accessible and well-publicized channels for children, their representatives and others to report [sexual abuse and exploitation of children] – *government leadership is vital here, including through regional bodies as appropriate, with support from agencies that can implement the services and provide follow-up for those who use them.*
9. Improved accountability for those who perpetrate [sexual abuse and exploitation of children] – *the responsibility of government through its judicial and law enforcement arms but also the responsibility of those who have management responsibility or are in positions of oversight.*
10. Policies and programmes should be designed and implemented from a gender perspective, taking into account the different risks facing girls and boys – *the responsibility of all those who develop, influence, support or implement policies and programmes to prevent sexual abuse and exploitation, protect children, support victims, or work with perpetrators.*
11. Improved data collection and information systems to identify children at risk, inform policy and programming and track progress – *the responsibility of government primarily, with support from agencies such as the ILO and UNICEF who have expertise in data collection and tracking.*
12. Ratification and implementation of all relevant international treaties and obligations – *the role of government and regional bodies; UN agencies and civil society organizations have an important role to play in advocacy and support to government decision makers in this area*