

Causes and contributing factors

If there were one simple cause of commercial sexual exploitation of children, then the massed forces of public outrage, government and non-government programming, judicial and police action and civil society mobilization – all of which have grown in the five years since the first World Congress against Commercial Exploitation of Children in Stockholm in 1996 -- could be focused on it with significant impact.

But there is no single cause. Invariably children get caught up in commercial sexual exploitation through a series of inter-linked factors and events, or the conjunction of vulnerability and opportunity, supply and demand. It is important to acknowledge and map out this complexity, if the responses to it are to be appropriate and effective.

The poverty debate

One good example of this complexity is the ‘poverty debate’. Many commentators suggest that poverty is, itself, a reason why children are sold into commercial sex. If this was true, then all poor families would sell their children into prostitution. In fact, many families living in the most difficult circumstances say they would rather starve than see their daughters trapped in prostitution or otherwise exploited. In short, poverty alone is not the reason why children are exploited into commercial sex.

At the same time, there is no doubt that poverty does play a significant role in the commercial sexual exploitation of children: it provides a context in which families are sometimes pushed to desperate lengths when some trigger factor – such as the death of a breadwinner, natural disaster, displacement, conflict or sickness – adds to the already intolerable burden of poverty.

Poverty is also implicated on the exploiters’ side of the equation when, linked with a lack of respect for the child’s rights, it contributes to the decision to recruit, abduct or otherwise force children into sex as a way of earning money.

Poverty, then, is very often a contributing factor to the commercial sexual exploitation of children, but it is rarely the only reason why such exploitation occurs. It becomes determinant when it exists alongside ignorance or greed, opportunity or coercion, conflict, loss, consumer pressures, traditional practices, family breakdown or separation, migration and urbanization, and discrimination against children (especially girls) in general and specific ethnic and marginalized groups in particular.

Ignorance is not an excuse

Ignorance also plays an important part in the commercial sexual exploitation of children in families and societies where educational opportunities are limited or where the messages of education about sexuality are weak or overpowered by much stronger contrary messages from the media, traditional practice or societal behaviour. Often children themselves and/or their families do not realize what awaits them when a child is recruited into exploitative situations generally or into prostitution in particular, or when the child is taken for less formalized sexual encounters with paying customers. They are ignorant not only of the health risks to the child but also of the severe psychological long-term harm the child can suffer when self-esteem and trust in others are destroyed.

In such situations, beyond general measures to alleviate poverty, educational and awareness-raising initiatives are important protection activities. These may take the form of modules in the school curriculum, public awareness raising at different levels (in community centres, youth groups, women’s groups, workplaces, for example), in the mass media and via community leaders.

While poor educational opportunities put children in less developed countries at risk, young people in the industrialized world who have educational opportunities nevertheless face the reality that classroom attempts to encourage careful sexual behaviour are far outweighed by the more persuasive messages coming from advertising, television, films, popular magazines, music and other forms of popular media – with associated peer pressure to conform.

Consumer and peer pressure

Just as poverty is not the determining factor in commercial sexual exploitation, neither is it a result of the much-criticized imagery of the media. Here, again, the factors that push children and young people into prostitution or less formal paid sexual activity are complex and linked. It is true that in most countries, whether the main medium is digital television or street-corner poster display, images of scantily dressed adolescents and young people in suggestive poses or situations have become commonplace. But sexualized images of teen behaviour on television, for example, have less impact where they are effectively counterbalanced by positive school experiences, a protective family environment and a generally supportive community.

In short, the media, the education system, parents and family, society at large – none of these are ‘to blame’ for making children vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation, but each has a different role to play in protecting them, and all of these sectors need to work together to ensure that there are no gaps in the safety net.

The advertising industry, in particular, plays an important role not only in reinforcing consumer pressures on young people to earn money to buy the latest clothes or gadgets, but also in contributing to competition among young people – sometimes across continents – to wear or own what their peers do. For vulnerable children, overt and indirect peer pressure can be a decisive force in pushing them to earn money whatever the cost. In the Philippines, for example, research published in September 2000 showed that, while adults believed that poor awareness among families was the major reason why children found themselves in commercial sexual exploitation, surveys among children caught in prostitution indicated peer pressure as the major trigger factor.

Traditional excuses

Given the wide variety of factors that contribute to the commercial sexual exploitation of children, it is clear that non-governmental organizations (NGOs), multi- and bilateral organizations, government social service and education sectors, community organizations and structures, the media professions and children’s and youth groups all have a role to play in protecting children from commercial sexual exploitation, taking account of each other’s particular strengths and weaknesses.

Such collaborative undertaking is particularly important in societies where some forms of commercial sexual exploitation of children are culturally or historically condoned or even encouraged. This is the case, for example, in communities where children are put into sexual servitude to religious or tribal elders in atonement for adult wrongdoings, in payment of debt or traditional or religious duties. Although these forms of exploitation may not immediately seem to involve commercial transactions (at least not in the sense that the stigmatizing phrase ‘child prostitution’ conjures up), they do involve the use of a child for sexual pleasure and to represent payment ‘in kind’.

These forms of commercial sexual exploitation are particularly difficult to confront and eliminate. In a world, however, in which all but two countries have ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child and thus signalled their acceptance of a child’s right not to be exploited for sex or commercial gain, such exploitation cannot be justified by reference to arguments of cultural integrity and non-interference.

Moreover, cultures evolve. A number of societies have undergone changes with regard to sexual exploitation of children as a result of contact with others. In some parts of Asia, for example, societal values and behaviour shifted considerably as a result of long-term contact with foreign or peacekeeping forces in the closing decades of the twentieth century. In addition to the risks inherent in stationing large contingents of men without their families in a difficult, strange living situation, such an influx of 'outsiders' can introduce into a society values, habits and demands which are not necessarily known or understood, or can shift the balance of behaviours. It can similarly often lead to a situation where sexual practices once considered exceptional or wrong come to seem not so unusual and therefore more acceptable.

In countries like Vietnam, for example, the presence of large numbers of foreign military personnel in the 1960s and 1970s increased demand for commercial sex services and introduced more liberal attitudes to sex. When the troops went home, the country was left with a significantly developed commercial sex sector, wider societal acceptance of commercial sex and heightened demand in the local communities. As in many countries, the fear of HIV/AIDS, beliefs in the therapeutic powers of virgin sex, easier and cheaper international travel and an increased criminal supply of under-age girls into prostitution meant that the now thriving sex trade soon included large numbers of children.

When protection mechanisms break down

While it is clear that the factors that contribute to the sexual exploitation of children are many and diverse, and may differ depending on the society or country into which the child is born, one causal situation is common to children across the globe: children who are sexually abused by someone in their own family or circle of friends are extremely vulnerable to sexual exploitation outside the family too or later in life.

Some abused children will live with their pain until they are adolescent or adult. Research has shown that these victims of domestic sexual abuse, stripped of their self-esteem when they are young and confused about relationships and emotional ties, often find themselves in violent or abusive relationships again, whether it be from a spouse, partner, friend or casual acquaintance. In countries from the United Kingdom to South America, surveys among adult prostitutes have shown that many entered commercial sex after being abused at home. Sometimes, sexual abuse by a parent or relative drives young people out of the family home and onto the streets, where the need to survive makes them vulnerable to pimps, traffickers, drug peddlers and other manipulators.

Paradoxically, research has also shown that sexually abused women, in particular, are among the most reliable reporters of sexual abuse in their adult life: a woman abused as a child will more readily report abuse that she sees occurring later, whether in her own family or elsewhere.

Families are the first nurturers, educators and protectors of children and their rights. Family values are essential to the child's perception of self and the world in which s/he lives. When, for whatever reason, the family does not fulfil this obligation and trust, the child's first line of defence against an incomprehensible and unsafe world breaks down.