

Trafficking of children

Sexual exploitation is more often than not a question of isolation and domination – isolating a child by preying upon his/her vulnerability and then wielding power over him/her either directly through sex or indirectly by exposing the child to sexual abuse by others. Moving the child far away from home and community, and any protection mechanisms they offer, makes the exploitation easier and, if the exploitation is for commercial purposes, then the profit easier to realize.

Entrapment and movement

Moving children away from their normal environment in order to exploit them is called trafficking. It happens at a number of different levels: children may be moved from their home town to another part of the country where they are isolated from their normal environment so that they can be more easily dominated and exploited. Often this reflects economic disparities between city and village, or between poor and more affluent regions of a country; exploiters take advantage of this to lure children and their families into thinking that travel to the city can only bring advantages. Movement may involve transport by road, rail, sea or (less frequently) air. Often it is little more than a bus ride away. Village girls recruited for unskilled jobs and picked up by pimps when they arrived at the central bus station in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa, for example, told interviewers they were trapped in prostitution because they did not have the fare to return home, although a ticket cost less than one US dollar.

Internal trafficking of children is often aided by recruiters who are known to the community. In northern villages in Thailand, for example, women known to the villagers promise relatively high paying cleaning or serving jobs for young girls in Bangkok and tourist centres. They tell of the work available in hotels, bars and middle class homes, and often offer to pay the expenses involved in placing the girl, against a debt to be paid off out of the girl's earnings. The same is true of countries in Latin America, South Asia, and poorer regions of Europe. Wherever families need money to survive or sometimes just want a higher standard of living, and where children are deemed subservient to the authority of adults, the child may have to work to help support the family. This is especially true of girl children, whose duty to earn money for the family is considered to outweigh their right to an education, although boys too are victims of traffickers in many parts of the world.

Sometimes the families do not know what awaits the child and never learn, or learn only when the girl is returned to them, sometimes sick and no longer a viable product for her exploiters to sell. Even children who do go into non-hazardous work after being transported often end up in the sex trade, their debt bondage and isolation making them easy targets for secondary exploitation. One common path to exploitation is from village to resort hotel cleaning duty, to resort bar serving, to hostess work to commercial sex.

More generally, children trafficked for labour purposes are at increased risk of subsequent recruitment into commercial sex. They may be in jobs that are hazardous to their health, and find themselves of no further use to the employer if they fall ill; at this stage they may end up on the street or recruited directly into commercial sex. They may work in isolated locations, such as mining communities, where the male-dominated environment makes them vulnerable to sexual abuse from workers. Thus any form of child labour, particularly if it involves trafficking away from the familiar environment, increases the child's vulnerability to sexual exploitation. At each stage the pimps, recruiters and middlemen take their cut while the child becomes more and more isolated, vulnerable and difficult to trace.

The criminal exploiters involved in this kind of trafficking might not fit the usual picture that is conjured up by the phrase 'trafficking ring' – they might comprise an elderly 'auntie', a pimp in the city and a bus driver or hotel clerk paid to turn a blind eye. But their very innocuousness helps them to

function as they do: they easily deceive, take few risks and yet eat away at the lifeblood of the communities they target.

Cross-border exploitation

Trafficking across borders often works on a bigger and more organized scale, if only because the logistics are more complex and the profits generally higher. Some cross-border trafficking is relatively routine, following land routes that have traditionally been used to smuggle contraband cargo: mountain passes, sparsely controlled or unmanned border crossings, frontier posts with corruptible guards. The land borders between Eastern Europe and the counties of mainland Western Europe, for example, have long been crossed by criminals moving stolen cars, counterfeit consumer goods and, increasingly in recent years, drugs.

In the wake of conflict and social crisis in many of the countries of Eastern Europe, where structural adjustment and a breakdown of social support nets have plunged many families into poverty and forced young people onto the streets, children too are traded across the borders. Here, too, they may believe that they are on their way to a better future in legal or illegal employment in the west. More often than not their isolation results in exploitation of one kind or another, often in the sex trade. Children are also moved across these borders to meet the demand of paedophiles in Western Europe.

Clearly moving human contraband across land borders is less risky than by air or sea since – in the near border-less countries of Europe particularly – land border checkpoints are few and far between, busy and often not closely policed, and the land borders are long, allowing different crossing points to be used. Children moved by air or sea, on the other hand, arrive at designated ports or airports, usually with customs and immigration controls. Since the mid-1990s, governments have worked and cooperated to improve the awareness and vigilance of police and customs officers to recognize and intercept traffickers involved in the exploitation of children, although much more work needs to be done in this area.

International initiatives

Cooperation among governments has aided this important step in eliminating the commercial sexual exploitation of children. Several governments have signed memoranda of understanding recognizing that trafficking occurs across their shared borders and committing themselves to combating it. A recent example is the memorandum of understanding signed between Mali and Côte d'Ivoire in West Africa.

A number of governments have cooperated in training programmes for customs officers and police. Improved information sharing and tracking of known criminals and paedophiles has been supported by better technology and systems. Interpol's Standing Working Group on Offences against Minors has continued to coordinate international police cooperation on missing and abducted children, and the creation of Europol has reinforced this action within the countries of the European Union, where open borders and relaxed customs and immigration controls have necessitated greater focus on cross-border crime.

In January 2001, the European Commission proposed a package of measures to combat trafficking in human beings and the sexual exploitation of children. It is estimated that some half a million people are trafficked in the European Union alone each year. The comprehensive strategy includes legal protection for children trafficked into and within the EU for both labour-related and sexually exploitative purposes. It includes common definitions among Member States of the EU, common sanctions, including imprisonment, for crimes relating to sexual exploitation, child pornography and prostitution of children, and provides for enhanced cooperation. It also reinforces the importance of extraterritoriality provisions, allowing Member States to cooperate across borders to prosecute exploiters accused of criminal activity in other countries.

Extraterritoriality is also a cornerstone of the Council of Europe's Recommendation R (91) 11 which, as early as 1991, called upon Member States to introduce rules on extraterritorial jurisdiction among a range of other collaborative actions to combat trafficking. R (91) 11 also recommends the supervision

of artistic, marriage and adoption agencies, which may be set up as fronts to facilitate the movement of young people across borders. Both the European regional bodies undertake regular review of progress on cross-border initiatives.

Additionally in early 1997, as part of its response to the Stockholm Congress, the European Commission created the Daphne Initiative and the STOP Programme, both designed to facilitate civil society action against commercial sexual exploitation of children. The STOP Programme was specifically aimed at encouraging cooperation and capacity building among police, customs and judicial sectors in the European Member States. The Daphne Initiative, which in 2000 became a four-year programme, funds project activity by NGOs and local government in a wide range of areas related to violence, including sexual violence and trafficking. Between 1997 and 2000, some 200 projects involving more than 600 NGOs across Europe were funded in the 15 Member States. In 2000, too, the candidate countries were given access to the Daphne Programme, effectively widening its scope into Eastern Europe.

The international community has also signalled its determination to criminalize and eliminate the trafficking of children through a reinforcement of the United Nations Office for Drug Control and Crime Prevention and through a number of United Nations inter-agency regional programmes against trafficking. New international instruments have been adopted, including a supplementary protocol to the UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime which deals specifically with trafficking in human beings, especially women and children, and ILO Convention 182 which commits States Parties to eliminating trafficking as a component of the worst forms of child labour.

A number of countries have also taken specific measures against trafficking in recent years: in October 2000 the US President signed the 'Victims of trafficking and violence Protection Act 2000', which foreshadows the establishment of an inter-agency taskforce to monitor and combat trafficking. States in West and Central Africa are negotiating a cooperation agreement on the repatriation of child victims of trafficking, an initiative that follows the agreement of a common platform of action adopted in February 2000.

Colombia has established an inter-institutional committee for action to combat trafficking in women and children, and in 1998 the Mexican state of Puebla amended its Code of Social Protection to include provisions against trafficking in and abduction of minors. Also in Latin America, new legislation to combat sexual exploitation and trafficking of children was introduced by Costa Rica in 1999.

In Asia, too, regional strategies and cooperation agreements have been strengthened to reflect the growing importance of cross-border response to this cross-border crime. Legal reform related to trafficking of children has been introduced in China, Cambodia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Caring for the victims

Despite these reforms, every year large numbers of children are trafficked in order to satisfy the demand for child sex within the commercial sex trade, in less structured commercial exploitation, and by paedophiles. In addition to the risks to their physical and psychological health associated with commercial sexual exploitation, trafficked children also face the hazards of extreme isolation, the exclusion of language and culture, and the potential of victimization by authorities faced with their illegal situation.

If they are rescued or otherwise taken into custody by customs or police, they may run the risk of incarceration with adult offenders, criminal proceedings, deportation or other re-victimization threats. Very often it is the children, rather than the traffickers and exploiters, who are treated as criminals.

Sadly, too, many children who are returned to their places of origin face discrimination because they have been involved in sexual activity, or based on fears that they are unclean or unhealthy. Some are rejected by their families and communities, and have to be provided with safe accommodation and

other social services. Case management of rescued children is a severely under-resourced and neglected area, partly because it is so often needed on a long-term basis.

Non-governmental and intergovernmental organizations are particularly important players in work to protect children at risk of being trafficked, and at supporting those who have been trafficked.

Prevention projects are wide-ranging. They include assessing the vulnerability of children and families and identifying those who are at particular risk from traffickers, and undertaking studies and surveillance to map trafficking activity and routes. Also important is advocacy and awareness raising; in areas where children are vulnerable because their families do not understand what happens when a child is handed over to exploiters, promoting understanding is a potent aid to protection. To mitigate the push-pull pressures of economic disparity, which often see young women in poor towns and regions moved to more affluent areas under the guise of improved opportunities, NGOs have developed alternative income-earning projects in which girls are trained in skills areas that will help them to find employment in their own region and thus fend off family pressures to leave home or recruiters' promises to the family that they can guarantee a better income if the girl is handed over to them and moved away.

Some NGOs also undertake rescue activity, interrupting the trafficking of the child along the route, often at border stations or points of arrival such as ports. Such activity is extremely dangerous and the cooperation of local authorities and law enforcement is vital – another example of where cross-sectoral cooperation makes a difference.

Civil society organizations and social services are also active in caring for children who have been trafficked. They provide health, psycho-social and legal counseling, food and clothing and, often at some risk, safe accommodation. If the child can return home, then NGOs, often in partnership with similar organizations in the sending country, attempt to ensure that the welfare of the child is monitored and that follow-up care is in place. Tragically, some children cannot return because they have contracted HIV/AIDS and are rejected by family and community. In such cases, it is often NGOs who become the child's short-term family.

Although much has been learned in the area of programming against the various stages of trafficking, however, it remains a challenge. Many children are still not reached by the programmes that are run, and field organizations report that the movement of children for both labour and sexual exploitation is growing.