

Sexual Exploitation of Children in Prostitution

Content Note

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In this paper, current discourses on the exploitation of children in prostitution will be examined in view of expanding knowledge and practical experiences. The framework will be rights-based², using the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) together with the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography (2000). The introduction will examine and contrast five key elements: advocacy, research on children and childhood, gender and prostitution, intergovernmental treaties and reports to monitoring bodies,³ the recent trend towards rights-based approaches among international children-oriented organizations and recent global economic and migratory changes, which have altered patterns of trafficking for prostitution among both adults and children. It will be argued that, although misleading and sensational reporting persists in some arenas, the international discourse is increasingly dominated by scientific information, a rational approach to the many challenges, and influenced by willingness to consider and tackle persisting, but largely unexamined, areas (such as the profiles of adult clients).

The exploitation of children in prostitution cannot now be examined without taking into consideration changed perspectives on childhood and prostitution, which are to a large extent due to the inclusion of both children and prostitutes in research and programming - as subjects of research and planning rather than objects of concern. As a consequence, concepts of 'childhood' and 'prostitute' are now undergoing revision, resulting in new challenges. The literature on adult female prostitution now includes studies suggesting that, in many cases, women in prostitution have considerable power over both their own bodies and their clients.⁴ In particular, the contention of childhood studies that children are active agents in their own lives has challenged the conventional view of children in prostitution as passive victims.⁵ The paper will examine arguments about the 'voluntary' prostitution of children, considering debates on adult prostitution and child prostitution, children's agency, children's rights, sexual development and rights, and legislation on the age of consent to sex, concluding that there is still no evidence that young children, in particular, can give informed consent to sexual relations with adults, even though they may believe that they are making voluntary decisions.⁶

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² Ennew, Gopal, Heeran, and Montgomery, 1996, *Children and prostitution, How Can We Measure and Monitor The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children? Literature Review and Annotated Bibliography*, UNICEF NY, Childwatch International and Centre for Family Research, University of Cambridge, New York, Oslo and Cambridge.

³ Including not only the CRC and Optional Protocol, but also ILO Convention 182, Conventions against the Prostitution of persons and women, Convention against International Crime and relevant reports of Special Rapporteurs

⁴ Hart, A., 1998, *Buying and selling power: Anthropological reflections on prostitution in Spain*, Westview Press, Boulder.

⁵ Montgomery, H., *Modern Babylon: Prostituting children in Thailand*, Berghan Books, Oxford.

⁶ Finkelhor, D., , "What's Wrong With Sex Between Adults and Children," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 49 (1979): 692-697.

Of course, there are many circumstances in which child prostitution clearly cannot be described as voluntary. Differing forms and definitions of prostitution will be described against the background of varied cultural contexts and practices, which either foster the prostitution of children or hinder its elimination. These include traditional (or quasi-traditional) practices and beliefs about gender, generation and patriarchy, changing constructions of childhood, the sexualization of childhood, ethnicity, economic environments and beliefs, as well as rapidly-changing sexual attitudes and practices, related to economic development and globalized youth culture.

Mechanisms of forced and ‘voluntary’ prostitution of children will be examined by mapping both qualitative and quantitative research on extent and incidence, critically reviewing definitions, research questions, methods, ethics, measurement and indicator construction. The paper will focus on improved information about the differences between prostitution of pre- and post-pubertal children, as well as differing patterns of prostitution of girls and boys. Information on clients of prostituted children (male and female, local and ‘tourist’) and the organization of the commercial exploitation of children (including recruiting agents and mechanisms, pimps and brothels) will be mapped, examining trends and identifying gaps where new research is urgently required.

The final part of this section will review research with children involved in commercial sex and attempt a summary of what children and youth have said about their experiences and opinions, including comments on the methods and ethical procedures used in such research.

Next the paper will examine the implementation of international and national legislation to prevent the prostitution of children, comparing this with what the previous section has revealed about patterns of prostitution of children, their clients and means of exploitation. This section will examine evidence for mechanism and practices that prevent or reduce the commercial sexual exploitation of children, at family, community, cultural and state levels, examining the potential for children and youth to play a role in prevention, as well as outlining the responsibilities of governments and civil society, including some consideration of good practice in legal frameworks and processes.

The emphasis on practice rather than advocacy or research is arguably the greatest expansion of expertise in the field since 2002. This section will map and review innovations in care and recovery, standards and quality of care, specialized counselling and social work and reintegration programmes, with particular emphasis on children-friendly and children-focused practice

The paper will conclude by assessing global, regional and national information on the extent and incidence of the prostitution of children, based on verifiable information, as well as summarising current and future challenges, including identifying trends in global and regional incidence, gaps in knowledge and practices, and research needs, including themes, concepts, methods and ethical considerations as well as quantification.

On the basis of these conclusions, time-bound goals for prevention, protection and provision, including measurement and indicators, will be recommended, including identifying the responsibilities of different duty bearers.