

Commercial sexual exploitation:

A modern form of slavery

The commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents **is a crime** that occurs when one or more people involve a boy, girl or adolescent under 18 years of age in sexual or erotic activities in exchange for an economic reward or any type of payment in kind (clothes, food, drugs, etc.).

Commercial sexual exploitation includes subjecting persons under 18 years of age to:

- Having sexual intercourse or carrying out other erotic or sexual acts in exchange for an economic reward or payment in kind.
- The production and distribution of pornographic material.
- Participating in public or private sex shows (in nightclubs, bars, at parties, etc.).
- Being transported to another country or region for commercial sexual exploitation purposes.

We use the term “commercial sexual exploitation” with the aim of making those who are chiefly responsible for this problem –the exploiters– visible, and of making clear the conditions of economic exploitation and slavery that characterize this activity, since other terms such as “child and adolescent prostitution” place the emphasis on “the person offering sexual services” and not on the exploiter.

Sadly, the sex trade in boys, girls and adolescents has become a lucrative “business” run by crime networks of exploiters, involving:

- ◆ **The “client-exploiters”:** pay for sexual activities with boys, girls and adolescents. They may be any nationality, age, marital status, profession, social class or sex, although the majority are male.
- ◆ **Pimps:** take advantage of the socio-economic conditions and vulnerability of the boys, girls and adolescents to involve, lure or recruit them for sexual activities in order that they may obtain financial gain from these criminal acts.
- ◆ **The intermediaries:** tend to be taxi drivers, owners and staff of hotels, massage parlours and photographic studios, who facilitate the exploitation in order to obtain financial gain from it. For example, they provide information on places where underage persons are sexually exploited, take the exploiters to these places or provide them with a space in which they can commit these crimes.

The exploiters are directly responsible for the problem, and should therefore be reported and prosecuted.

Those indirectly responsible for commercial sexual exploitation are all those who tolerate this crime by not reporting the exploiters or by not fulfilling their duty to protect and care for the victims.

What is the reality of the lives of the victims of exploitation?

- They are boys, girls and adolescents who have undergone many violations of their human rights, such as that of living within a family unit, health, education, protection by the State, justice and integrity, among others. In the majority of cases, they are female.
- They have, in general, experienced situations involving a lack of social protection which have made them very vulnerable, for example: intra-family abuse and violence, abandonment, poverty, exclusion from school, being turned out of their home, child labour and living on the streets. The exploiters take advantage of their vulnerable situation to exploit them sexually.
- They have not chosen to be sexually exploited.
- Some have been victims of trafficking, that is, they have been taken from one region or country to another for sexual exploitation purposes.
- They experience many negative consequences in their lives: social marginalization, sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, unwanted pregnancies, physical and emotional aggression, drug addictions, suicide attempts and even death.
- They have a right to be protected by the State.

What of the sexual freedom of the adolescents?

Putting a stop to commercial sexual exploitation does not mean limiting the sexual freedom of the adolescents since they have the right to a healthy and pleasurable sexuality that is free and responsible, without any obligation, abuse or being treated as an object. Equally, they have a number of sexual and reproductive rights recognized in international conventions and conferences, such as: the right to non-coercive sexuality, to choose their partner and to use contraception, among others, which are severely violated in situations of commercial sexual exploitation.

We should remember that cases of sexual exploitation constitute a crime and the adolescents, as well as the younger girls and boys, cannot give their valid consent to being treated as a sex object.

Although, at the global level, there is debate on the legality of adult prostitution, with regard to persons under 18 years of age there is no doubt as to its illegal status. Every country in the world has ratified international legal instruments that define as the exploitation of boys, girls and adolescents the subjection of these to commercial sexual activities.

We cannot, therefore, talk of the exercising of their sexual rights or of undertaking “work” when we are referring to a person under 18 years of age involved in commercial sexual activities. Regardless of whether they have supposedly given their “consent”, these persons have a right to state protection against any form of abuse or exploitation.

REMEMBER:

If a victim of commercial sexual exploitation is detected, their situation should be given general attention. For this purpose, there should be a plan of intervention that includes not only attending to their sexual and reproductive health by providing them, for example, with methods for the prevention of pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, but also a series of measures aimed at protecting and accompanying that person, with a view to ensuring they do not continue being a victim of exploitation.

Why does the commercial sexual exploitation of underage persons exist?

There are many factors that create a “demand” for sex with boys, girls and adolescents and the existence of cases of exploitation:

- A sexist and adult-centric society that treats women and underage persons as sex objects.
- The existence of highly organized criminal networks –many of which promote sex tourism– that make substantial profits from the sex trade.
- Social tolerance of the problem.
- Impunity of the exploiters.
- Improper use of advances in technology, for example, using the internet to distribute child pornography.
- Weakness of legal frameworks and policies on child and adolescent protection.

In order to combat commercial sexual exploitation, our work should centre on actions that allow the factors that are causing it, as well as those that make the victims vulnerable, to be overcome

What legal support does the fight against the exploitation have?

There are a number of legal instruments that support the fight against commercial sexual exploitation, such as:

- The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
- The Inter-American Convention on International Traffic in Minors/OAS
- ILO Convention 182 on the worst forms of child labour.
- The Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child regarding the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.
- The Convention against Trans-National Organized Crime and, in particular, its Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, especially Women and Children.

- The laws which some countries have approved with a view to ensuring the fulfilment of the rights of underage persons and that the sex crimes committed against them are penalized, such as the Child and Adolescent Codes and the specific laws on sex crimes and commercial sexual exploitation.

Non-Government Organizations faced with commercial sexual exploitation

Many NGOs have been pioneers in recognizing and researching the problem and including it on the public agenda. The actions which this sector can or continue to carry out are, therefore, essential to each of the areas combating the problem:

Prevention

- 1) Include dealing with the issue as part of the organizational agenda.
- 2) Support the development of subject matter related to commercial sexual exploitation, such as: gender equality, intra-family violence, sexuality, masculinity, and the human rights of the underage persons, among others.
- 3) Develop mass media campaigns for informing the public of the problem and contribute to encouraging intolerance towards sexual violence against underage persons.
- 4) Carry out a process of training and awareness of the issue aimed at officials in charge of dealing with the problem and civil society in general.
- 5) Promote a cultural change towards social intolerance of cases of exploitation, by influencing adult-centric cultural standards that treat underage persons as objects.
- 6) If there is only slight recognition of the problem and a weak institutional response, the organizations may include the issue on the political and public agenda.

- 7) Influence public policymaking with a view to ensuring the existence of universal social policies. These policies should combat the risk factors that increase the vulnerability of the underage persons such as: extreme poverty, sexual and intra-family violence, child labour and exclusion from school.

In order to make more of an impact on public policymaking, the children's and adolescents' organizations, as well as those working on issues of gender equality, should join forces since both are fighting towards a common goal: the fulfilment of human rights.

- 8) Actively participate in local and national coordination spaces (commissions, work groups, committees, institutional networks, etc.) that tackle the problem.

Care

- 1) Develop general care programmes aimed at underage persons at risk or underage victims of sexual exploitation, and their respective support networks. These programmes should take into account that it is the State that is chiefly responsible for guaranteeing the welfare and protection of the underage persons.
- 2) Work in conjunction with the community to set up networks for watching over and protecting those at risk.
- 3) The care model developed should be based on the following principles:
 - Protecting the victims
 - Working together with their support networks (families, friends, etc.)
 - Reinstating the exercising of all the victims' rights, in particular those of family protection, health and education.
 - Reporting exploiters whether they are client-exploiters, pimps or intermediaries.
 - Institutionalization of the victim as a last resort.
 - Following up on cases.

Monitoring

- 1) Watching over and following up on the commitments made by government authorities as well as the institutional response to combating the problem: if they take action or not in this respect, and its quality and effectiveness.

Penalization

- 1) Promote the strengthening of national legislation by supporting the enactment of laws and rules that guarantee the underage persons' rights are exercised, and demanded and restored in cases where they have been violated.
- 2) Report the exploiters as criminals
- 3) Collaborate with the legal authorities in charge of investigating commercial sexual exploitation crimes. This support is exemplified in the training and awareness workshops held for the staff of these authorities on issues of commercial sexual exploitation, child and adolescent rights, how to prevent re-victimization in legal processes, etc.

The elimination of commercial sexual exploitation implies a process full of struggles and challenges that require joint action on the part of all social sectors. NGOs are fundamental in this struggle for ensuring governments fulfil their responsibilities and for generating intolerance towards this severe violation of the human rights of our boys, girls and adolescents.

We must fight for their protection and report the exploiters!

Key phone numbers to report CSEC

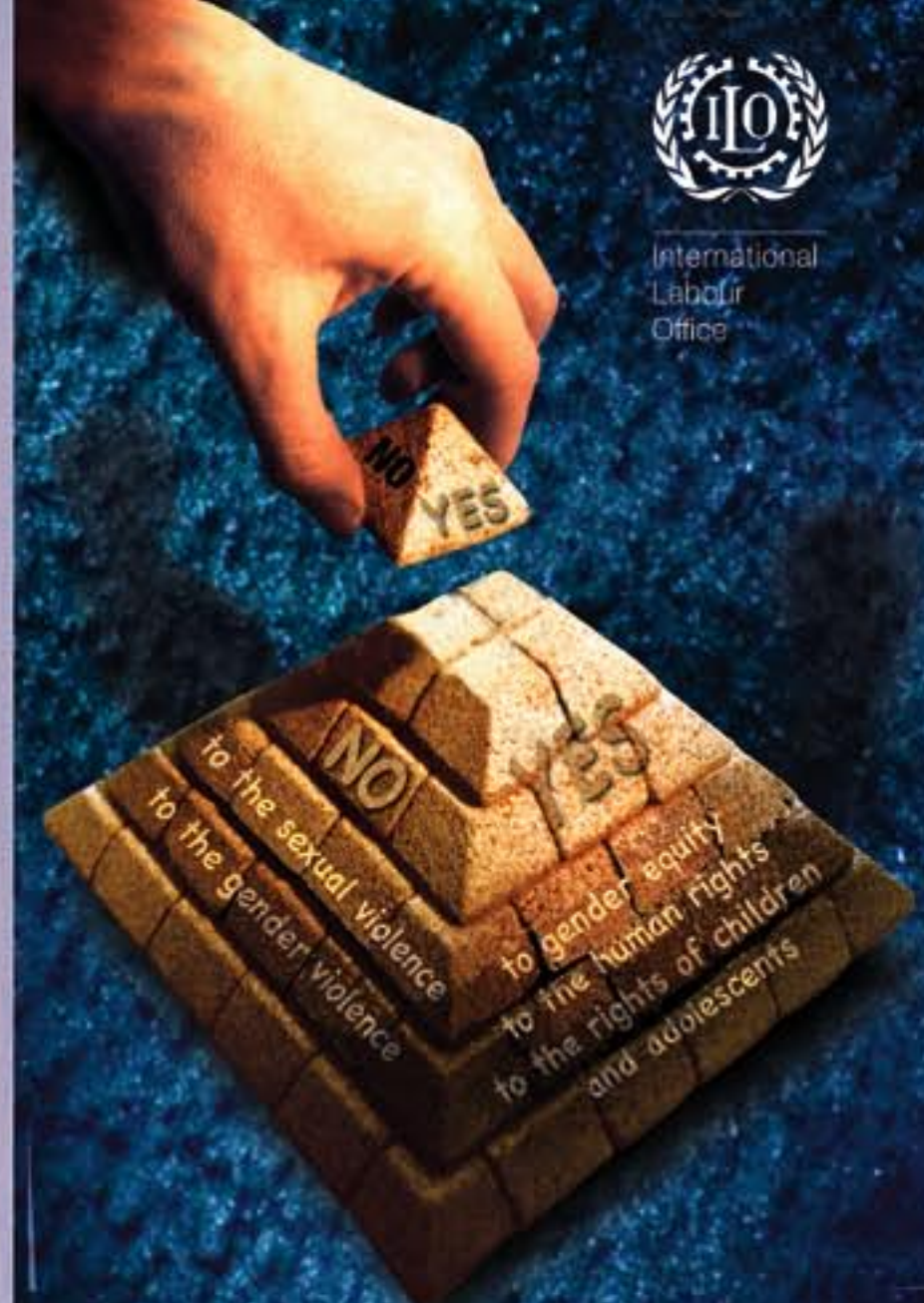
| Department of Human Services | Belize Police Department / Family Violence Unit |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Belize Dist.....227-7451 / 7452 | Belize City.....227-2222 / 2223 |
| Cayo Dist804-2098 | Belmopan822-2221 / 2222 |
| Corozal Dist.....402-2120 | Corozal422-2022 |
| Orange Walk Dist302-2058 | Dangriga.....522-2022 |
| Stann Creek Dist502-0038 | Orange Walk.....322-2022 |
| Toledo Dist702-2021 | Punta Gorda.....722-2022 |
| | San Pedro226-2022 |

For more information or orientation about CSEC contact:
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Project: "Contribution to the Prevention and Elimination of the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of children and adolescents in Central America, Panama and the Dominican Republic."
International Labour Office
International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour
For further information, please visit the following web page:
www.oit.or.cr/ipec/esc



International
Labour
Office



The role of Non-Government
Organizations
in the fight against
the commercial sexual exploitation
of children and adolescents