



**International Labour Organization
International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour**

**El Salvador
The Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children and
Adolescents:
A Rapid Assessment**

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Preface

Unacceptable forms of exploitation of children at work exist and persist, but they are particularly difficult to research due to their hidden, sometimes illegal or even criminal nature. Slavery, debt bondage, trafficking, sexual exploitation, the use of children in the drug trade and in armed conflict, as well as hazardous work are all defined as Worst Forms of Child Labour. Promoting the Convention (No. 182) concerning the Prohibition and immediate action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999, is a high priority for the International Labour Organization (ILO). Recommendation (No. 190, Paragraph 5) accompanying the Convention states that “detailed information and statistical data on the nature and extent of child labour should be compiled and kept up to date to serve as a basis for determining priorities for national action for the abolition of child labour, in particular for the prohibition and elimination of its worst forms, as a matter of urgency.” Although there is a body of knowledge, data, and documentation on child labour, there are also still considerable gaps in understanding the variety of forms and conditions in which children work. This is especially true of the worst forms of child labour, which by their very nature are often hidden from public view and scrutiny.

Against this background the ILO, through IPEC/SIMPOC (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour/Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour) has carried out 38 rapid assessments of the worst forms of child labour in 19 countries and one border area. The investigations have been made using a new rapid assessment methodology on child labour, elaborated jointly by the ILO and UNICEF¹. The programme was funded by the United States Department of Labor.

The investigations on the worst forms of child labour have explored very sensitive areas including illegal, criminal or immoral activities. The forms of child labour and research locations were carefully chosen by IPEC staff in consultation with IPEC partners. The rapid assessment investigations focused on the following categories of worst forms of child labour: children in bondage; child domestic workers; child soldiers; child trafficking; drug trafficking; hazardous work in commercial agriculture, fishing, garbage dumps, mining and the urban environment; sexual exploitation; and working street children.

To the partners and IPEC colleagues who contributed, through their individual and collective efforts, to the realisation of this report I should like to express our gratitude. The responsibility for opinions expressed in this publication rests solely with the authors and does not imply endorsement by the ILO.

I am sure that the wealth of information contained in this series of reports on the situation of children engaged in the worst forms of child labour around the world will contribute to a deeper understanding and allow us to more clearly focus on the challenges that lie ahead. Most importantly, we hope that the studies will guide policy makers, community leaders, and practitioners to tackle the problem on the ground.



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¹ Investigating Child Labour: Guidelines for Rapid Assessment - A Field Manual, January 2000, a draft to be finalized further to field tests, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipecc/simpoc/guides/index.htm>

Executive Summary

This Rapid Assessment seeks to provide some insight into the phenomenon of the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in El Salvador—a social problem with grave consequences for the overall development of those directly affected, as well as for the country as a whole. The problem touches upon a variety of aspects, such as public health, social and economic policy, legislation, etc.

Given the magnitude and complexity of the issue, the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents should be counted as among the most serious of human rights violations, undermining the development of the victims as persons and as citizens.

The path towards the elimination of this multidimensional phenomenon is complex, and therefore the problem must be treated in a comprehensive manner, addressing issues that range from legislation to practical and direct actions aimed at the victims and the population in general. The sexual exploitation of children and adolescents is closely linked to economic factors, but the main cause is the existence of a discriminatory culture that regards vulnerable groups as objects to be used as means for satisfying needs (sexual, economic, etc.) and imposes no restraints whatsoever on the violation of their rights.

This report merely hints at the complexity of the problem and at the difficulty of resolving it.

It is hoped that this assessment will ultimately lead to an in-depth study and analysis of the phenomenon and encourage the search for joint and comprehensive solutions by various actors to ensure respect for the rights of vulnerable groups and promote their empowerment, emancipation and development. This study provides some guidelines and advocates the development of joint efforts. In short, it seeks to orient strategies for eliminating the practices that discriminate against the full development of children and adolescents.

This study is being carried out within the context of the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) of the International Labour Organization (ILO), given that the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents is one of the worst forms of child labour being addressed by IPEC.

In order to provide a more complete understanding of the problem of the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in El Salvador, this study has adopted a rights- and gender-based methodology, in keeping with the general procedures of the Rapid Assessment methodology developed jointly by the ILO and UNICEF and advanced by IPEC. It seeks to provide an analysis based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative information.

In the first place, the report establishes a theoretical and conceptual framework for analyzing the subject of commercial sexual exploitation. It also describes the most

relevant national and international efforts being undertaken in relation to the topic. In this connection, it is worth noting that such efforts have been oriented towards childhood in general, rather than to the specific issue of sexual exploitation.

Secondly, the report presents an overview of the situation of children, placing special emphasis on the age group targeted by the study. Generally speaking, the parents of most of the children concerned are engaged in a variety of occupations, ranging from professionals to salespersons, shopkeepers, employees and manual workers. The main breadwinner in the households of these children is the father. Some of the children included in the study still live with their father and/or mother and the vast majority lived with them at one time.

It should also be noted that the children included in the study have suffered some type of sexual and family violence and that, in general, their first sexual experience occurred before the age of 14.

The vast majority does not perceive early sexual initiation as a result of rape to be a form of violence. The person who violated them is usually someone they know and even someone for whom they have affection, love or in whom they trust. These factors make it difficult for them to recognize the situation in which they find themselves as one of violence and mistreatment.

Thirdly, the report presents the findings of the field research carried out on the basis of 94 surveys taken of sexually exploited children and adolescents in the metropolitan area of San Salvador. The main variables dealt with in the study include the health, education, employment situation and prospects for development of the children concerned.

The research findings show that all the children included in the study possess at least a minimum proficiency in reading and writing and that the majority possesses a relatively solid foundation in terms of formal education (having acquired at least a primary or basic education). Nevertheless, a high dropout rate was also noted.

With regard to health, many boys and girls presented health problems attributable to the fact that they had been sexually exploited. Nearly 4 out of every 10 had contracted a sexually transmitted disease. The researchers also noted poor health habits, which were detected through medical and microbiological examinations. Furthermore there was a high incidence of self-medication with respect to sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), without following the procedures of formal clinical treatment.

Lastly, the conclusions related to the most relevant findings of the study are presented. They describe the situation of the children concerned from a number of perspectives and their prospects for development, among others. Although it cannot be assumed that the situation of the children included in the study is the same for the entire target population, the report does establish some guidelines for the formulation of strategies on behalf of children and adolescents subjected to sexual exploitation in the country.

The report concludes with some recommendations for the development of future actions aimed at the elimination of the commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in El Salvador.

The full text of this report is available in Spanish at
<http://www.ilo.org/public/spanish/standards/ipecc/simpor/elsalvador/ra/sexexp.pdf>