

# ECPAT INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL

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## UNSEEN VULNERABILITIES: THE LINK BETWEEN CHILD LABOUR AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN

*From domestic labour to  
commercial sexual exploitation:  
The hidden risk for child workers*

*Child labour and vulnerability  
to CSEC: Investigating work and  
gender structures*

*Visible yet 'unseen':  
The vulnerability of street children  
to sexual exploitation*

**ECPAT** is a global network dedicated to protecting children.  
We coordinate research, advocacy and action to end the  
commercial sexual exploitation of children.



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## PREFACE

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This ECPAT Journal Series No. 8 on the links between child labour and commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is published at an important time, to coincide with the III Global Conference on Child Labour, hosted by the Government of Brazil, in cooperation with the International Labour Organization (ILO), from October 8-10, 2013. According to ILO's most recent statistics, there are 215 million child labourers around the world, 115 million of whom are children working in the worst forms of child labour. The Conference is an opportunity for reflection and joint dialogue between governments, social partners, civil society, regional and international organisations on the progress made in the elimination of child labour, especially its worst forms, as well as a space for presenting proposals of mechanisms to aid in the elimination of this phenomenon.

The problem of child labour is addressed in ECPAT International's 2nd Edition Country Monitoring Reports on the status of action against commercial sexual exploitation of children, as this form of sexual abuse of a child –

in exchange for money or in-kind remuneration – is defined by ILO Convention 182 as one of the worst forms of child labour. This includes child prostitution, child pornography/child sexual abuse materials, sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes. ECPAT's Country Monitoring Reports take an in-depth look at this worst form of child labour at the national level by identifying and evaluating a country's relevant legislation, protection policies, prevention measures, education and training programmes, plans of action, cooperation and coordination mechanisms, and child protection policies regarding CSEC.

This ECPAT Journal is dedicated to highlighting the often 'hidden' or 'unseen' link between child labour and CSEC. The covert nature of this link stems from multiple factors including the employment of children in the private sector – such as domestic labour – where they are hidden physically from view, as well as the lack of protection and services for children living and working on the streets who are extremely vulnerable to

CSEC.

Domestic service is a common occupation for children in many countries – especially young girls – and it is a widely accepted form of employment because it is considered safe work for children. The first article of this Journal, *From Domestic Labour to Commercial Sexual Exploitation: The Hidden Risk for Child Workers*, focuses on the link between child domestic labour and CSEC. The article emphasises that child domestic workers labouring behind the closed doors of private households are 'invisible': shielded from public view and attention and often hard to reach by conventional policy and programme tools.

Marginalisation, exclusion, isolation and invisibility are key features of domestic work, which contribute to further increase the vulnerability of a group – that of domestic workers – which is already vulnerable, being largely composed of women and children. The article concludes that children involved in domestic work in households other than their own face numerous risks and are exposed to all forms of violence, including the risk of becoming

victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

The Journal's second article, *Child Labour and Vulnerability to CSEC: Investigating Work and Gender Structures*, focuses on examining factors of vulnerability; in particular when, how and why child labour increases the vulnerability of a child to commercial sexual exploitation and how gender affects that vulnerability. The article examines the link between child labour and CSEC through an investigation of the areas that are particularly hazardous for children, such as: work that involves contact with the public, including the entertainment, services, tourism sectors and street work; and work within the private sphere, with particular attention to child domestic work. The article concludes with the examination of some important gender implications in relation to child labour, gender roles, the commodification of (female) bodies and CSEC.

The final article, *Visible yet 'Unseen': The Vulnerability of Street Children to Sexual Exploitation*, aims to expose the extent and scope of the multiple vulnerabilities

of children living and/or working on the street, in particular to commercial sexual exploitation. It describes the trajectory towards sexual exploitation that children surviving on the street fall into and it highlights the limited prevention and protection measures afforded to these vulnerable children by state actors and other duty-bearers. The article ends by calling for comprehensive prevention and street-based programmes that are supported by a wide collaboration of stakeholders and protection responses.

It is hoped that this Journal will serve as a useful tool for the participants at the III Global Conference on Child Labour in analysing the current status of child labour globally. Beyond the Conference, however, it is hoped that the Journal will serve to highlight the 'hidden'/'unseen' link between child labour and CSEC, and to examine the factors and lack of social protection systems that make children vulnerable to child labour and CSEC in order to aid in the prevention of this phenomenon.

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# From Domestic Labour to Commercial Sexual Exploitation: The Hidden Risk for Child Workers

Elisa Felicini

## Introduction

In the last few years, domestic work has been the object of growing interest and concern at the international level, becoming one of the main topics discussed during the 100<sup>th</sup> Session of the International Labour Conference<sup>1</sup> which resulted in the adoption of the Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (No. 189) and the accompanying Recommendation (No. 201). ILO Convention No. 189 fixes a set of international standards aimed at improving the working conditions of millions of domestic workers worldwide, ensuring them the same fair terms of employment and decent working conditions as other workers. The adoption of this instrument was welcomed as a “breakthrough of great significance” by Juan Somavia, ILO Director-General, as for the first time ILO’s standards system moved into the informal economy.

Although domestic work represents a significant share of global wage employment, domestic workers remain, to a large extent, excluded from

the policy-making on social and labour issues and hence from legal protection enjoyed by other workers. Since they work behind the closed doors of private households, domestic workers are ‘invisible’: shielded from public view and attention and often hard to reach by conventional policy tools. Marginalisation, exclusion, isolation and invisibility are key features of domestic work, which contribute to

further increase the vulnerability of a group – that of domestic workers – which is already vulnerable, being largely composed of women and children (ILO, 2013).

Child domestic labour was a core issue of the last World Day against Child Labour (June 12, 2013), which was marked by ILO with the launch of a specific report focused on this topic (ILO - IPEC, 2013). This

confirms once again the strong concern that this widespread and hidden phenomenon arouses within the human rights community.

Domestic service is a common occupation for children - especially teenage girls - all around the world and it is widely accepted because it is considered safe work for children and a good training opportunity for girls who, in many countries, are expected to become wives and housekeepers (Black, 1997). Despite this commonly shared positive perception, child domestic work can – under certain conditions – be classified as a form of child labour. In fact, children involved in domestic work



<sup>1</sup> The 100th ILO Conference took place in June 2011, in Geneva (Switzerland).

in households other than their own face numerous risks and are exposed to all forms of violence, including the risk of becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation.

This paper is divided into three sections. The first one examines the phenomenon of child labour in domestic work and the legal instruments that protect children from this kind of exploitation. The second section identifies common features between child domestic labour (CDL) and commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), in particular with regard to the profile of children and adolescents involved and the hidden/'invisible' nature of these forms of child labour. The third section underlines possible linkages between child domestic labour and commercial sexual exploitation of children. Two types of connections are analyzed: one is related to the perception of child domestic work and the underestimation of connected risks which traffickers take advantage of while recruiting children for commercial sexual exploitation; the other is related to potential consequences of child domestic labour, illustrating that domestic labour and commercial sexual exploitation can easily and frequently constitute stages of a single process. The passage from one to the other may come as part of the search for better opportunities (ILO, 2004).

## Domestic work as a worst form of child labour

### Child labour in domestic work

Child labour is universally acknowledged as a condemnable phenomenon to be rooted out worldwide. However, just as there is a lack of consensus among relevant stakeholders globally on who is considered a 'child,' the definition of 'labour' is equally problematic. In the international discourse on child labour a distinction is made between 'child labour' and 'child work.' It is said that work is a form of employment that is beneficial to the child, whereas labour refers to "the production and services which interfere with the normal development of children." This is consistent with the International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions on child labour as well as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognises "the right of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical,

mental, spiritual, moral or social development" (Jha, 2008).

In some concrete cases, the boundary line between what should be classified as child work and what should be classified as child labour is not clearly visible or evident. This is particularly true in the case of child domestic work, not only because it is performed behind closed doors, but because of the general perception of this type of work. In fact, domestic work is often not perceived as employment, but rather as an obligation that children have towards adults, as an opportunity to mature and - especially in relation to girls - as important training for later life (ILO – IPEC, 2013). Domestic service is one of the world's oldest occupations and it has historically been considered natural and normal work for children. The awareness that, under certain conditions, it may be defined as a form of child labour – if not one of the worst forms of child labour – is still lacking in many geographical and cultural areas of the world, resulting in weak protection provided to child domestic workers who are probably one of the least protected groups of child workers (ILO, 2013).

If conditions of child domestic work are in most cases reasonable and acceptable when children work in their own homes, the risk of being involved in child labour dramatically increases when children are involved in domestic work in households other than their own, as it exposes them to countless risks (ILO – IPEC, 2013).

## Child domestic work as a form of slavery

Recent estimates of the International Labour Organization (ILO) report that approximately 15.5 million children are involved in paid or unpaid domestic work in the household of a third party or employer. Of these children, 10.5 million are estimated to be involved in child labour, either because they are below the legal minimum working age (under ILO Convention No. 138 Concerning the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment), or are working in conditions considered to be a worst form of child labour, such as hazardous work or slavery-like situations (under ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour) (ILO, 2013). ILO Convention No. 182 does not explicitly mention child domestic labour among the worst forms of child labour (Art. 3), as it does, for example, the exploitation of children in prostitution and other illicit activities. Despite this, child domestic work can be defined as a worst form of child labour when it falls into the categories described by Art. 3a (“all forms of slavery or practices similar to slavery, such as the sale and trafficking of children, debt bondage and serfdom and forced or compulsory labour”) and/

or by Art. 3d (“work which, by its nature or the circumstances in which it is carried out, is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children”).

Though international concern about child domestic labour often focuses on the hazardous working conditions and on the potentially harmful activities carried out by child domestic workers (that is concerning the nature of the work itself), greater attention should be given to the relationship between the child and the employer, regardless of whom the latter is, whether an unknown person or a child’s relative (Blagbrough, 2008). Therefore, child domestic labour should be defined as one of the worst forms of child labour, not only due to the due to the potentially hazardous nature of the work itself – yet potentially hazardous – but rather for the terms under which children are employed which frequently ignore the willingness of the child to perform the demanded labour; do not adequately protect children’s fundamental rights both as children and as workers; and do not guarantee children’s basic freedoms.

The relationship between child domestic workers and employers is not a balanced one and is weighted in favour of the latter who may act

as the child’s master rather than as her/his employer, forcing the child to work in conditions of forced labour<sup>2</sup> or servitude<sup>3</sup>, if not of actual slavery.

According to multiple research studies, the isolation and discrimination experienced by child domestic workers (CDWs) in their employers’ households emerge as common factors in child domestic work. In different countries many former child domestic workers who lived with their employers (live-in CDWs) report that their employers tried to control and isolate them from their families by limiting their opportunities to communicate and discouraging visits. Many of them also faced daily discrimination inside the households regarding sleeping conditions, food and general attitudes of the employers towards them, which is frequently reported to be insulting, offensive, aggressive and demeaning. Psychological, verbal, physical and sexual violence is also commonly experienced by CDWs, especially by live-in CDWs. Child domestic labour is often 24-hours a day/7 days a week work, meaning that “in both live-in and live-out situations, the child’s working day usually has a set start time but no set finishing time and hours are dependent on the

2 Article 2(1) of ILO Convention on Forced Labour (No. 29, 1930) defines ‘forced labour’ as “all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily.”

3 Article 1(d) of the UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (1956) defines ‘child servitude’ as follows: “any institution or practice whereby a child or young person under the age of 18 years is delivered by either or both his natural parents or by his guardian to another person, whether for reward or not, with a view to the exploitation of the child or young person or of his labour.”

**15.5 million children**  
are involved in paid or unpaid domestic work  
in the household of a third party or employer.



needs and whims of the employers” (Antislavery International, 2008). CDWs are usually denied their basic right to education because employers don’t allow them to go to school. Even when they are initially promised an opportunity to attend school, the long working hours and requirements of their job make it impossible for them to attend (ILO, 2004). Employment is mainly based on verbal agreements between employers and the child’s parents rather than on written contracts. Most CDWs report to be paid a low wage or no wage at all for their work. Despite the harsh working conditions of CDWs, the daily experiences of discrimination and isolation in the household are reported as the most difficult part of their work (Antislavery International, 2008).

In 1993, the ILO’s Committee of Experts on the Application of the Convention on Forced Labour, 1930 (No. 29) and Recommendations (80th Session) discussed the situation of young children working as domestic servants, analysing the specific case of the so-called *restavék* (‘stay with’) children in Haiti.

They were normally girls from poor rural areas who were given away or sold by their parents to other families for whom they were expected to work as domestic servants and after their placement – often arranged by intermediaries – the family lost track of them and, as a result, the children became completely dependent on their employing family. This dependency increased their vulnerability and exposed them to other forms of

abuse and exploitation. In this context, the practice of *restavék* was openly compared to slavery in Haiti (Blagbrough, 2008).

In conclusion, in many concrete cases child domestic work appears like a form of slavery – under the provisions of the UN Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (1956) – and must therefore be considered not only as child labour, but as one of the worst forms of child labour, according to ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (Art. 3).

## Common vulnerabilities of children in domestic labour and commercial sexual exploitation

Commercial sexual exploitation of children comprises sexual abuse by an adult with respect to a child – female or male under 18 years old – accompanied by a payment in money or in-kind to the child or to one or more third parties. The

child is treated as a sexual and commercial object. Commercial sexual exploitation of children includes: child prostitution, child pornography/child sexual abuse materials, sexual exploitation of children in tourism, and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes.<sup>4</sup>

According to ILO Convention No. 182, child domestic labour (CDL) and commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) can both be defined as worst forms of child labour. However, because of the different natures of the work, they can appear as two completely separate and distinct phenomena and can be perceived very differently. Child domestic work is seen as a normal practice in many areas of the world, often encouraged by families, unlike the work of children in the sex business which is usually strongly condemned. In some countries, domestic work is barely considered a ‘job’ and CDWs are usually considered to be luckier and safer than those involved in prostitution (Blagbrough J., 2008). This perception – that distinguishes these two forms of child labour on the basis of seriousness and danger faced by children involved – is not realistic and largely underestimates the risks involved with child domestic work. Though CDL and CSEC remain two different phenomena, they share some common factors that make them more similar and more related than they initially may appear.

<sup>4</sup> “The Stockholm Declaration”, Declaration and Agenda for Action. First World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children (Stockholm, Sweden 1996).

## Profile of victims of CDL and CSEC

One common factor that links CDL and CSEC is that they are both likely to affect the same groups of children sharing a similar profile, in particular regarding gender and family background. Although boys are sometimes exploited in these forms of child labour, the majority of children involved in CDL and CSEC are girls (ILO, 2005; ILO – IPEC, 2013). In regard to CDL, this is mainly due to women’s (unique) role as mothers who take care of the household in most societies around the world. As such, domestic work is considered to be not only natural work for girls, but also an ideal training opportunity for later in life, as a natural extension of preparation for motherhood. In regard to CSEC, although boys are also involved, girls are undoubtedly more exposed to the risks of sexual harassment, sexual abuse, sexual violence and sexual exploitation in general (ILO, 2005; ILO – IPEC, 2009).

Although the family context of victims of CDL may vary, a number of studies show that those who are not in contact with their families and cannot therefore count on their support and protection – such as many migrant and trafficked children – are much more exposed to abuse and violence of all kinds (Rubenson et al., 2004; ILO, 2004).

Similarly, lack of parental care is one of the major factors that render children susceptible to CSEC. The family background of children involved in CSEC frequently includes poor and

dysfunctional families, single parent families, alcohol and/or drug addiction, poverty that may push parents to sell their children to intermediaries and traffickers, cases of domestic violence, maltreatment and sexual abuse. Often children who are exploited for sexual purposes are street children who have no family or have run away from home.

In conclusion, CDWs and children involved in CSEC are usually female and often share a common family background. Both are push factors towards contexts where the child is likely to experience sexual violence and slavery-like working conditions.

## Invisibility and isolation in CDL and CSEC

The ‘invisibility’ of child domestic servants and of children involved in CSEC is one of the most evident common factors between the two phenomena. In the case of CDL, invisibility derives from the hidden nature of domestic work which takes place within the confines of a private home; in the case of CSEC, invisibility is necessarily linked to the illicit nature of the activities involved.

CDWs are particularly invisible because not only do they work behind the closed doors of their employers’ homes, but many societies do not see what they do as work or think of it as dangerous or hazardous for children. It is seen rather as an obligation that children have towards adults (in



particular in familial settings) and – especially in relation to girls – as important training for later life (ILO – IPEC, 2013). Although large in numbers, CDWs remain invisible and marginalized both economically and socially because of myths surrounding their employment, as it is conventional to regard domestic work as a ‘safe’ form of employment (Antislavery International, 2008). Invisibility is normally combined with isolation, as in both CDL and CSEC the employer/exploiter tends to isolate the child by limiting his/her movements and/or by forbidding contact between the child and her/his family, thus making the child completely dependent upon the employer (ILO, 2013).

The isolation and invisibility surrounding child domestic labourers and children involved in commercial sexual exploitation have at least three evident consequences:

- Increase of children’s vulnerability, exposing them to risks other than those related to the work itself, such as psychological, physical and sexual violence;
- Scarce information about both CDL and CSEC and the lack of reliable data making it very difficult to assess the extent of these phenomena;
- Difficulty in detecting/fighting CDL and CSEC and, as a result, difficulty in reaching and protecting children who are involved.

Despite some common factors, the different social perceptions of CDL and CSEC play a decisive role in orienting the policies on child protection. In fact, the fight against child labour often just minimally addresses CDL, underestimating it and ignoring its linkages with other forms of exploitation, such as CSEC.

## CDL and CSEC: two related phenomena

Several field studies have identified two significant potential links between CDL and CSEC, which once more demonstrates that CDL is not only hazardous on its own, but also directly linked to CSEC because of the ( unsuspected) risks that this kind of work implies.

A first link between CDL and CSEC is established because the promise of employment as a domestic worker is often used by traffickers for recruiting children for commercial sexual exploitation. A second link may be found in the fact that many times CDL leads to CSEC.

## Promise of safe and useful work

Findings of several studies carried out in many different countries on these issues reveal that children who migrate from rural to urban areas, from small towns to big towns, or from poorer to wealthier neighbouring countries looking for employment opportunities as domestic workers often end up being exploited in the sex trade.

In the case of domestic work, children are frequently recruited by intermediaries who broker deals between parents and employers and who transport children to their employing families. Intermediaries tend to be known in the communities from where they recruit children for domestic service. They are often local vendors or business people, with connections in both source and destination areas, but they may also be recruiters from job placement agencies, friends or even family members. “In West Africa, for example, ‘aunties’ (who may or may not be actual relatives) are frequently involved in recruiting children from rural areas for domestic work in urban centres, both within countries or neighbouring nations” (Blagbrough, 2008).

Commonly, intermediaries deceive the child and/or the child’s parents who are given false promises about the type of work, working conditions, opportunities for education and what the child’s life will be like. Typically, therefore, the

way in which significant numbers of children enter domestic service can legitimately be described as trafficking (Blagbrough, 2008). Trafficking is recognized in many cases, for instance in the West and Central Africa regions, as an extension of the traditional custom of 'placing' a child with extended family members. Such 'placement' for domestic work has been recorded, for example, in Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana and Mali (ILO – IPEC, 2001).

In the Philippines, traffickers of children have increasingly used domestic work as a lure into other - less acceptable - forms of labour, such as commercial sexual exploitation. Parents and their children are duped into thinking that the child will be employed as a domestic worker, when in fact the intention is to traffic him/her into prostitution (Flores-Oebanda et al., 2001; Antislavery International, 2008).

In Europe the scheme is similar with girls from eastern countries being deceived with false promises of employment opportunities. For example, young girls who travel to Denmark for 'au pair' work are believed to be particularly vulnerable to human trafficking and at high risk of being lured into prostitution, as a summer job or a short-term job in domestic service is often used to attract children and women from countries such as Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania with the purpose of sexual exploitation (Save the Children Denmark, 2010 and ECPAT International, Denmark, 2012). This practice is strongly linked to the widespread positive perception of domestic work which is regarded as a natural part of a

child's upbringing and as safe work for children. Accordingly, traffickers take advantage of a child's and/or parents' confidence and of the lack of awareness of the risks hidden within domestic work.

### Commercial sexual exploitation as a consequence of CDL

Many country research studies have found that girls who end up in prostitution often start off in domestic work and leave because of abuse and harassment. While this is not the case for all girls, this finding suggests that there may be a link between CDL and CSEC, which often seems to represent stages of a continuum leading to such exploitation.

For example, it was established that more than a quarter of girls being commercially sexually exploited in Dar es Salaam (Tanzania) were former CDWs, many of whom were sexually abused by members of the family for whom they were working (Mwakitwange, 2002). Other studies on children in prostitution in Tanzania confirmed this figure: in about 25% of cases girls become involved in prostitution after they have been abused as child domestic workers. About 90% of the girls interviewed moved from rural areas to urban areas to find employment as CDWs (Kamala et al., 2001). Similar findings have been reported in El Salvador (ILO-IPEC, 2002). In 2006, a research study published by ECPAT Uganda identified CDWs - among others - as one of the groups most exposed to CSEC (ECPAT International, 2013).

Linkages between different worst forms of child labour, such as CDL and CSEC, are not always present. For example, research conducted in Myanmar concluded that children involved in prostitution do not seem to be escaping domestic work, but rather are pushed into the sex industry by traditional causes of poverty and other domestic abnormalities (ILO, 2004). According to other research carried out in Thailand, it is not evident that domestic workers automatically end up being sexually exploited. In Ecuador, agricultural work, domestic labour and sexual exploitation are all seen as a process of abuse, one leading to the other (ILO, 2004).

Although a link between CDL and CSEC is not always present or explicit, it is common that maltreatment and violence – especially sexual violence – frequently experienced by CDWs within the household highly expose them to the risk of being involved in CSEC, with sexual abuse being one of the factors leading to prostitution.

The risk of abuse and harassment in child domestic work is greatest among live-in CDWs, who are present in the household on a continuous basis. In Haiti, *restavèk* girls are sometimes called *la pou sa*, a Creole term meaning 'there for that' – reflecting a commonplace acceptance of the sexual abuse of these children by the men or boys of the household (NCHR, 2002). Unfortunately, the case of Haiti does not represent an exception: in all countries, sexual violence towards child domestic workers is a very common practice (ILO-IPEC, 2013).

The hidden nature of domestic work, the child's isolated situation

and her/his indistinct role in the employer's household makes her/him particularly vulnerable to physical, verbal and sexual abuse, which very often goes unseen and unreported (ILO-IPEC, 2009). Abused child domestic workers tend not to report their abuse: some feel they are powerless to prove such attacks and/or are dependent on their employers for basic needs; others fail to report abuse out of a sense of duty to their parents to make the situation work or just because they are afraid to speak out (Blagbrough, 2010).

Given the hidden nature of their workplace, intervention on behalf of CDWs is particularly difficult. Consequently, in cases of abuse, they tend to tolerate the difficulties they face rather than be out of work (ILO, 2004). Some of them even accept abuse as 'just part of the job.' However, even when discrimination, physical and mental punishment or sexual harassment are strong reasons to leave, the absence of alternatives or support mechanisms force many of them to remain in the employer's household (ILO, 2004).

Despite this, many children involved in CDL decide to run away having nowhere to go, but preferring a life without shelter or food to a life of servitude and abuse. They don't go back home as they don't want to face the humiliation of going home empty-handed and being perceived as a failure in their attempts to earn money or obtain an education (ILO, 2004). In these situations, former CDWs easily fall into prostitution and are highly vulnerable to the risk of commercial sexual exploitation.

The same vulnerable condition is faced by CDWs who, as a consequence of sexual abuse within the employer's household, become pregnant and for this reason are thrown out of the house. In this case the shame they feel for their situation is great and prevents them from returning home where they would likely be judged as 'spoiled girls' and would probably be rejected because their behaviour has dishonoured the family. In these instances, where the girl must fend for herself on the streets, domestic work typically becomes a precursor to commercial sexual exploitation, as those concerned have few other available options than engaging in prostitution for survival (UNICEF-ICDC, 1999).

It has been established that regular violence or its continuous threat leads to a loss of self-esteem and a self-perpetuating cycle of abuse develops, making abused CDWs even more vulnerable to CSEC once they – either voluntarily or not – leave the household where they worked (Pinheiro, 2006). A study in Ecuador found that all girls involved in the sex industry had experienced situations of physical and/or sexual abuse, lack of protection, emotional neglect and/or abandonment. Sexual violence, slavery-like working conditions and low pay are frequently reasons that justify the choice of many CDWs to leave the household and end up in prostitution because as one victim stated, when they have to go to bed with someone, at least they are paid for it and are not abused like dogs (ILO, 2004, Vol. I). Therefore, becoming involved in prostitution often results from the failure of other strategies to meet basic needs, such as

domestic work. In this sense, CDL and CSEC are potentially strongly linked.

In some cases commercial sexual exploitation occurs simultaneously with domestic work: in a field study undertaken by Anti-Slavery International in 2004, it was found that a number of Filipino former CDWs had been forced to engage in prostitution by their employers who owned bars and brothels while they were employed as domestic workers. (Antislavery International, 2008; ECPAT International, 2011). Though this may occasionally occur, it is more common for commercial sexual exploitation to occur afterwards and as a consequence of a CDL experience.

Girls who end up in prostitution often start off in domestic work.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Although a general belief prevails that domestic labour provides disadvantaged children with a relatively safe, comfortable alternative to poverty or other forms of child labour, there should be a global awareness about the common vulnerability that affects all children involved in any form of child labour, even in CDL. This vulnerability exposes them not only to a number of risks related to one specific form of exploitation, but also to the risk of switching from one to another in a never ending cycle – and an escalation – of violence and exploitation.

Domestic work in households other than the child's own house is not risk-free work for children and it has largely been demonstrated that it can, under certain conditions, be properly defined as child labour or fall under the definition of worst forms of child labour, according to

ILO Convention No. 182.

Moreover, research studies undertaken in many different countries have revealed that the invisible nature of domestic work, the isolation and dependence of CDWs on their employers, and the discrimination, violence and abuse that CDWs frequently experience within the walls of their employers' households all contribute to establish a framework of high vulnerability for the child, who thus may be easily involved in other forms of exploitation, such as CSEC.

Though the existence and the nature of linkages between CDL and CSEC are not automatic, the risks hidden within child domestic work should not be ignored by families or by communities and public institutions. Indeed, they should be the object of great concern and of socio-political interventions at various levels in order to strengthen the child protection network.

Child domestic work should be regulated and monitored, while CDL should be officially and legally recognised as a form of child labour. Awareness-raising activities should be implemented at international, regional and local levels in order to increase the awareness of families, children and entire communities about CDL and related risks, recruiting strategies of traffickers

and children's rights. Local communities should play a role in protecting children, especially when the family is not physically present or is not adequately caring for them.

Reducing the isolation faced by CDWs in their employers' households is fundamental for lessening their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Keeping in contact with their families and the establishment of local groups where CDWs can meet and support each other would contribute to partially overcoming the isolation and invisibility that characterise their work.

Finally, a network of protection should be implemented or strengthened at the local level in order to monitor child domestic work and all situations in which children are involved, to meet CDWs' needs, to receive their help requests and to provide support if needed. This is especially vital in the delicate phase when they decide to leave their employers' households in search for another job, as this is one of the most critical moments for CDWs who – without a job, shelter or any kind of support – could end up living on the streets where they would be easily exposed to the risks of falling into prostitution and commercial sexual exploitation.

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# Child Labour and Vulnerability to CSEC: Investigating Work and Gender Structures

Giulia Patané

## Introduction

Child labour debates generally revolve around several main themes: the factors that compel a child to enter the labour force, whether or not it is right for a child to work, the physical and psychological consequences of child labour, the relationship between child labour and education, and an analysis of the risks involved in each type of labour. This article, however, will focus on examining factors of vulnerability; in particular when, how and why child labour increases the vulnerability of a child to commercial sexual exploitation,<sup>1</sup> and how gender affects that vulnerability.

An overview of the vulnerabilities that lead to the premature entry of children into the labour force will be presented in the first section of the article. This will lead to some preliminary discussions of gender; specifically the feminisation of



poverty and girls' (limited) work opportunities. The link between child labour and commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) will be detailed in the third section of the article through an investigation of the areas that are particularly hazardous for children, such as: work that involves contact with the public, including the entertainment, services, tourism sectors and street work; and work within the private sphere, with particular attention to

child domestic work. An analysis of the information provided will direct the discourse to some important gender implications in relation to child labour, gender roles, the commodification of (female's) bodies and CSEC.

<sup>1</sup> Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) is a criminal practice that includes different forms of child rights violations through exploitation. These include: child trafficking for sexual purposes, child prostitution, child pornography/child sexual abuse materials, and sexual exploitation of children in tourism.



## Children and work: numbers and risk factors

This article is motivated by the recent reports that estimate a very high number of children are in the workforce. The most recent International Labour Organization (ILO) report places the number at around 305,699,000 (ILO, 2011; ILO, 2013a). This population is exposed to various explicit as well as more hidden risks, possibly increasing the child's vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation. The extent, characteristics and motivation of the risks to which a child worker is exposed and potentially subjected vary depending on the sector concerned. These will be investigated in section 3 of this article.

Generally, however, the vulnerability of a child primarily and simply derives from the compromised position that he/she occupies while looking for, or when involved in, labour, which is in itself a vulnerable position. This is a consequence of the precarious position of

possessing lower bargaining power and the greater inclination to accept exploitative or even dangerous working conditions. Moreover, limited work opportunities put those who are searching for work at a higher risk of reliance on potentially criminal intermediaries.

Specific groups of children are generally more at risk of becoming victims of commercial sexual exploitation, as a result of being driven to search for employment. Their particular vulnerability derives from the detrimental and compromised context in which they are already living. These groups include: "runaways, children from dysfunctional families, children of sex workers, homeless children, AIDS orphans, migrant children, children from ethnic minorities and out-of-school children" (IPEC-ILO, 2008; ILO, 2003).

The disproportionate number of children involved in the work force can be traced to several additional factors, which reveal a high exposure to the risk of exploitation. Primary grounds derive from purely socio-economic factors: poverty, growing and high population density, low or irregular household income (Ali, 2011; IPEC-ILO, 2008; The Protection Project, 2007) or parents' low wages (Brown, 2002; Awan et al., 2011), economic disparity, illiteracy (Ali, 2011; Awan et al., 2011), movement of people (IPEC-ILO, 2008), and large family size (Awan et al., 2011). Secondary

factors may be determined by cultural aspects, such as children's sense of duty towards their parents – especially in South East Asia (Montgomery, 2012 and 2007; Taylor, 2005; Berger et al., 1999) – and the parents' aim to teach their children certain skills through work. Other relevant factors are: abuse, violence, discrimination, neglect or a negative family environment which may prompt a child to prematurely leave the house or run away (Lukman, 2009; IPEC-ILO, 2008), or the premature death of parents. Finally, natural disasters and armed conflicts can result in the mass displacement of populations, and consequently inspire the need to rebuild one's life, starting with the search for a source of income.

### Entry points to vulnerability to CSEC

The relation between children, work and vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation can be observed primarily at two stages: firstly, when a child is searching for employment; and secondly, when he/she is already employed. A child searching for work opportunities is highly susceptible to encountering potential criminals such as traffickers, brokers and exploiters. Trust in adult figures, the need for protection and an already vulnerable background make a child an ideal victim. This risk is further increased if, beyond the search for work, transit elements are included, both within the country and across borders. People (and children) in need of work must often overcome language barriers, the lack of knowledge of culture

Over 305 million children are in the workforce.

and administration, and often lack of documents. This can compel individuals to rely on intermediaries. Indeed, in this situation people in need very often rely on traffickers and brokers to smooth the process of migration, avoiding the numerous checkpoints or arranging transport into and through a country (GAATW, 2010). Given the criminal nature of brokers within illegal immigration, and given the significant turnover of money that sexual exploitation entails for intermediaries, the high vulnerability of a migrant (especially a child) to fall victim to illicit organisations or single criminals is evident and derives from the illicit context by which the victim is surrounded.

Once a part of the work force, the child is exposed to additional risks which intensify his/her susceptibility to commercial sexual exploitation. These may derive from exposure to adults in particularly hazardous environments (public or private, legal or illegal), or because of the absence of control or protection. Employers, customers, or criminals may abuse their inherent position of power as an adult over a child, taking advantage of their ability to dominate and control and the child's lower physical and mental endurance.

A child searching for work opportunities is highly susceptible to encountering potential criminals such as traffickers, brokers and exploiters.

## Gender disparity and traditional gender roles in child labour: preliminary observations

Within a discussion on child labour, two preliminary gendered arguments should be included, in order to better evaluate the context with particular reference to girls. Firstly, poverty and its "feminization" have a strong impact on children, especially girls. Secondly, girls in search of work face additional difficulties in relation to work options, as their choices may be limited by traditional gender roles.

More women than men endure poverty worldwide. The phenomenon of the feminization of poverty leads to a vicious cycle perpetuated across generations (ILO, 2003). The feminisation of poverty, in fact, influences girls both as (future) women and as daughters. The difficulties that a mother facing poverty has to confront are always reflected in her children. This is particularly true in relation to female children; girls are often expected to assist their mothers in caring for the family,

including economically, through employment. And in so doing, they may possibly compromise their education and, consequently, their career path. Similarly, if a family can afford education for one child only, they will most likely invest that education in a son (ILO, 2003). This will compel daughters, particularly first born girls, to enter the work force earlier, as unskilled, low paid workers, thus triggering and maintaining a vicious cycle of poverty in the family.

Moreover, once in search of work, girls face several gendered restrictions, which limit their career choices. In general, children have a tendency to copy the gender roles of their parents (ILO, 2003), including with respect to work. Girls and boys are inclined (or obliged, if not forced) to select works respectively in gender-appropriate sectors. Generally, for girls this means services, domestic work, and entertainment; for boys it means mining, fishery, etc. (ILO, 2003). This differentiation has an important impact in relation to girls' actual decisions in selecting work, because it perpetuates an often discriminatory and restrictive identity.

The relationship between (girls') roles, work and vulnerability to CSEC will be explored in section 4 of this article. What already emerges from these preliminary evaluations is a clear picture of gender discrepancy: girls are likely to be more affected by poverty than boys; therefore, they are more likely to enter the work force (including unpaid household work) earlier. As a result, they are often unskilled and uneducated. Furthermore, the

employment opportunities available to them are limited due to strictly established traditional gender roles.

## Investigating work sectors

The link between child labour and CSEC does not have the same impact in every area where children are involved in economic activities. Certain work sectors appear to be more "fertile" than others, dramatically increasing the vulnerability of children to sexual exploitation, with or without the commercialisation element. The explicit risk of CSEC is manifest for children involved in "public" sector work where direct contact with potential predators is palpable, especially when the sex market or sex tourism plays a significant role in the environment. As will be discussed later, however, even "private" sector work can greatly increase the vulnerability of children to commercial sexual exploitation, precisely because they are invisible to the eyes of society and not in direct contact with known and notorious risks. The child is made vulnerable by invisibility and the offender is consequently made to feel empowered and secure. The

particular power dynamic that this kind of "private" employment may create is very different from the frequent, direct and repeated contact with adult criminals in employment in the "public" sector.

### Workplaces in contact with the public

#### Entertainment, services and tourism sectors

The involvement of children in the labour market in areas that require direct contact with the public implies risks deriving precisely from that direct contact. This connection has its most obvious manifestations in areas in which body performance is explicitly on sale and even significantly greater connection in legal or illegal adult commercial sex venues. Such locations represent the most likely areas where sexual performances of underage children (employed through false documents or without contracts) are sold and customers can "comfortably" exploit them.

In general, however, the entertainment industry, even when not directly connected to the adult "sex market," can embody a more or less concealed risk of CSEC. The link between children's work in such activities and their vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation is prominent in places such as karaoke bars, massage parlours, nightclubs, pubs, beer gardens and bars.<sup>2</sup>

2 Concrete examples of this association have been demonstrated in Albania, Colombia, Indonesia, Italy, Mongolia, Philippines, Romania, Singapore, South Korea (ECPAT International A4A Reports), Thailand and Vietnam (ECPAT International A4A Reports; The Protection Project, 2007), Cambodia (ILO, 2007; ECPAT International A4A Report; The Protection Project,

Commercial sexual exploitation, in this sense, can find its entry point in the entertainment business, where youths, especially girls, begin work in these sectors and then fall victim to sexual exploitation within a year or two (Rushing, 2006). The labour becomes a gateway to the exploitation. Similar, though more hidden, links between child labour and CSEC can be identified in the service sector, especially tourism, and especially in emerging tourism destinations such as hotels, restaurants and bars (The Protection Project, 2007). Here the vulnerability comes from the direct contact criminals may have with potential victims and from the power dynamics connected to the client-service provider unbalanced relationship.<sup>3</sup>

## The labour becomes a gateway to the exploitation.

The service industry is generally considered a female-dominated sector; however, two exceptions have emerged: barber shops and the transportation industry. Children working in these activities are mainly boys who do not escape

2007), Honduras (The Protection Project, 2007), Jamaica, Tanzania (ILO, 2004 vol. 3), Ghana (ILO vol. 1).

3 The A4A reports of ECPAT International tracked this connection among other countries in: Albania, Bangladesh, Cameroon, Colombia, Singapore, Thailand, and Uganda (ILO, 2004b).

vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation within their work. Here the risk mainly derives from clients and employers.<sup>4</sup> Another male-dominated working area at high risk of CSEC is the street. The peculiarities and characteristics of this form of child work deserve a more thorough analysis, addressed in the next section.

The connection between child labour and commercial sexual exploitation in the entertainment, service and tourism sectors has three main explanations. Firstly, often employers, staff, and other adult workers in the employment context are primarily responsible for connecting the child with his/her offender, acting as organiser or occasionally pimp, pushing children into prostitution (ECPAT International A4A Reports: India, Nepal, Pakistan; Rushing, 2006; The Protection Project, 2007). Secondly, in tourist areas with a marked growth of sex tourism, girls working in places like bars, hotels, and karaoke bars are considered "indirect" sex workers, and the entertainment industry masks a vast number of sexually exploited victims (Rushing, 2006). Finally, and consequently, in countries where the sexual exploitation of children in tourism is ingrained or is emerging, hotels, guesthouses, restaurants and bars represent the main avenues through which tourist predators come into first contact with their victims, interacting with them and facilitating the exploitation. In fact, one of the greatest risks to which these children are subjected is the so called "grooming" technique, through which the offender tries to build a relationship of confidence

<sup>4</sup> ECPAT International A4A Reports - barber shops in South Korea and the transportation industry and bus terminals in Pakistan and Uganda.

with the child to obtain his/her trust to be able to obtain sexual favours in exchange for goods (The Protection Project, 2007), including drugs (Kudrati et al., 2008).

### The street and its specific risks

According to UNICEF (2006), there are tens of millions of street children across the world. The extremely high vulnerability of a child working on the streets, beaches, and in open markets derives both from the perilous environments and from the ease and frequency with which offenders may come into contact with children in a public context. In addition, the need for money to survive constitutes a determinant element in the power dynamic between the exploiter and the exploited (Sing and Purohit, 2011).

A child living on the street has to endure many threats. Rape and sexual abuse, along with physical and verbal violence, occur repeatedly (Celik & Bayabuga, 2009; Evans, 2002; Gloria & Samuel, Kudrati et al., 2008; ILO, 2004a and 2012; Mathur et al., 2009; Oncu et al., 2013). In these surroundings, commercial sexual exploitation represents one of the most abusive and pernicious violations of a child's human rights.<sup>5</sup> The connection between street work and the vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation derives from direct exposure to potential criminals and from the absence of control

<sup>5</sup> The risk of commercial sexual exploitation of children who work on the streets has been detected in a number of countries: among others Albania, Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Cambodia, Cameroon, Colombia, India, Italy, Mongolia, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Romania, Singapore, South Korea, Uganda, and Vietnam (ECPAT International, A4A reports), Tanzania, (ILO, 2004b), Ghana (ILO, 2004a).

and protection. Paradoxically, children living and working on the streets are, on one hand, the most physically visible, and on the other the most invisible, because many times they are ignored (UNICEF, 2006).

Street children's activities include begging; selling newspapers, handicrafts, post cards, or lottery tickets; providing services for

There are tens of millions of street children across the world.

tourists; shoe shining; collecting garbage (The Protection Project, 2007); working as a kayaye i.e. porter (ILO, 2004a, in particular Ghana's section); vending gum, candy, or souvenirs, especially on the beach (Miller, 2011); washing cars; and illicit behaviour such as drug trafficking or other criminal acts (Gustafsson-Wright & Pyne, 2002). Selling sex can be seen by children as a form of income to supplement other street activities (ILO, 2004a; Kudrati et al., 2008). Although commonly the victimisation is facilitated by adults who serve as intermediaries (taxi drivers, hotel and restaurant employees, or even police), it often happens that street children are simply approached by sex offenders in the streets, with no mediation of other adults (The Protection Project, 2007).

## Street boys and CSEC

Among the vast number of children living and working on the streets there is a predominance of boys (UNICEF, 2006). The lower presence of girls on the streets may derive from an alleged security that an indoor work environment appears to provide for girls, and from the greater independence that street work involves, to which males appear more comfortable.

It was underlined earlier that street children, although physically visible, tend to be ignored by society, and hence become invisible when it comes to addressing problems concerning them, including CSEC. In this context commercially sexually exploited street boys risk a doubled invisibility. In fact, three aspects at this juncture merit consideration and reflection. Firstly, boys are generally not seen to be at risk for commercial sexual exploitation (Lillywithe & Skidmore, 2006). Secondly, even if girls are numerically more sexually exploited than boys (UNICEF, 2006), once boys enter the cycle of sexual exploitation they become more invisible (ILO, 2004 Vol.3). This may dramatically increase their vulnerability in terms of protection. Finally, the numbers of sexually exploited boys (especially on the streets or beaches) is evolving: in some countries their numbers are equal to those of girls (Pakistan – ECPAT A4A Report, 2011), in others male victims outnumber females (Sri Lanka – ILO, 2004 Vol. 3), and in several others they are constantly growing (Vietnam - ECPAT International A4A, 2011;

The Protection Project, 2007; India - Equation & ECPAT, 2009 and Bangladesh - ECPAT International A4A, 2006). This may show how more investigations on the extent of the phenomenon are necessary. These three aspects are, on closer inspection, connected with one another and with social expectations for males in general. Boys' invisibility in relation to CSEC (and to sexual abuse in general) creates a vicious cycle in which boys isolate themselves all the more because of shame and the preconception that they should be strong and able to take care of themselves; the more it is assumed that they are not at risk and the more they are shamed into not asking for help, the more difficult it is to protect them.

## Workplaces in the private setting

If, in the previous section, the vulnerability of child workers to commercial sexual exploitation was traced through the public nature of the environments in which labour is carried out, the following section will analyse children's susceptibility to commercial sexual exploitation in relation to private settings. In effect, the dynamic that may arise within a household labour context could result in an increase of the risk of CSEC. Two main linked factors increase this risk: the particular unequal power relationship that can easily emerge between an employer or other adults and the child worker; and the isolated environment leading to the seclusion of the (potential) victim.

An emblematic example of these two factors increasing a child's risk of commercial sexual exploitation is child domestic labour.

Child domestic work is a widespread phenomenon involving 15.5 million children worldwide, of which 10.5 million are below the legal minimum working age<sup>6</sup> or in hazardous surroundings (ILO, 2013a). In addition to the possibly dangerous domestic activities the child may undertake, commercial sexual exploitation represents a further, often underestimated, risk. The connection between this kind of work and the phenomenon of CSEC has been observed in a variety of research projects: for example, in one ILO-IPEC investigation conducted in 2002, the survey data on children involved in commercial sexual exploitation revealed that 25% of those studied were former child domestic workers. In addition, Blagbrough (2007) reported the correlation between child domestic labour and CSEC in the form of prostitution in the Philippines. Similar connections emerged in the ECPAT International Country Reports of Uganda, especially for girls aged 12-14, as well as in Denmark, Poland, Romania, and Singapore, where the danger is further connected to child trafficking. A first determinant factor that contributes to an increase in the vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation of children working in private settings derives from the

<sup>6</sup> According to the ILO Minimum Age Convention, 1973 (No. 138), the general minimum age for admission to employment or work is 15 years (13 years for light work) and the minimum age for hazardous work is 18 years (16 years under certain strict conditions).

power dynamics that may arise within a household environment. In fact, this typology of work may recreate subtle control mechanisms between employer and employee, especially towards children, who are easier to control (Anderson & O'Connell Davidson, 2002). This unbalanced power dynamic derives in part from the social construction that does not consider work in a private setting (and in particular domestic work) to be a real job (as will be explained below), but rather a duty of the worker as a "favour" for being hired by the employer; in part because of the economic transaction, which gives the employer even more control in the private setting. The control mechanisms over the child workers may become so strong that the employers feel they have a "property right" to their employees. The economic element, in this sense, would guarantee the employer's "right" to (even sexual) exploitation. Furthermore, the exploitation is facilitated by the impotence of the victim, who is easily malleable because he/she is in a position of dependence, with few work alternatives (Anderson & O'Connell Davidson, 2003).

This power differential is also reflected in the high incidence of domestic violence<sup>7</sup> and (sexual) abuse. A connection between abuse and commercial sexual exploitation (of children) in the form of prostitution has been recognised (MacKinnon, 2011).

<sup>7</sup> ECPAT International A4A Country Reports have detected domestic violence in: Albania, Australia, Bangladesh, Belarus, Bulgaria, Cambodia, Colombia, Denmark, Estonia, Hong Kong, India, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Mongolia, Nepal, Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Pakistan, Poland, Romania, Russia, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, Ukraine, USA.

Moreover, domestic abuse and violence are many times unseen and underreported (ILO, 2013a). This data points to a second contributing factor to the vulnerability of child domestic workers to CSEC: the child's invisibility (Gustafsson Wright and Pyne, 2002). On one hand, working in household surroundings can be recognised as a safe environment, because the child is not exposed to the dangers that employment in the public sector may involve. On the other hand, household work isolates the child between four walls, making it more difficult for him/her to search for help and/or to be removed from his/her exploitative situation.

Perhaps, though, the main reason leading to the high risk for girls in, but not limited to, private settings to fall victim to CSEC finds its origins in the cultural role of the female versus the cultural role of the male. The gender discourse will be detailed in the following section.

## Gender differentials

### Sex distribution

Understanding the nature of a child worker's particular vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation in relation to his/her work environment makes it possible to discern rather significant gender structures at work. Some preliminary assessments are related to the sex distribution of child labour in the different sectors in which they are involved. The distribution will help in the understanding of a gender differentiation which is entrenched in society, including within child labour, and systematically repeated since the child's infancy.

Employers feel they have a  
**"property right"**  
to their employees.

Data on child labour (ILO, 2011; ILO, 2013a) reveals how girls outnumber boys in the service sector (where boys prevail in agriculture and industry) and far outnumber them in domestic work<sup>8</sup> (Edmonds, 2005; ILO, 2003; ILO, 2013b). As a result, the service and domestic sectors have a visible prevalence for female child workers. Service/entertainment and domestic sectors, as underlined earlier, also represent two sectors in which the vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation is significantly higher. This confirms that girls are at a higher risk of becoming victims of CSEC than boys. What explains this link? Beyond the factors revealed and highlighted in the previous chapters, which strictly relate to the work environments, the gender implications are substantial and need specific attention, in particular with respect to female's roles and work, and what they represent.

## Girls' role within the work context

The role of women is constructed and elaborated in girls' minds from the very first contact with the work force, or even earlier within the search for employment. As underlined in the second section of the article, girls are inclined (or forced) to select certain types of work in accordance with their

<sup>8</sup> In fact, "4.2 million boys are involved in domestic work compared to 11.3 million girls aged 5-17 years." With specific reference to child labour in domestic work, "around 71.3 per cent (7.5 million) are girls and 28.7 per cent (3.0 million) are boys" (ILO, 2013a).

supposed position and purpose in society. Work simply becomes an extension of traditional female reproductive and caregiver roles in the domestic, service and entertainment industries (ILO, 2003). At the same time, girls also learn that the value of female work is considered socially inferior (or at least merely supportive) to that of men. Girls' domestic labour, for example, is often not considered child labour at all, but rather a duty. This notion adheres to traditional social norms, in particular those that tend to devalue women's work in the household context (Abebe & Bessel, 2011). The devaluation of female household work is reflected in the lack of remuneration when girls provide domestic routine chores "because these jobs are identified as female responsibilities" (Plan, 2011), provided for the love of the family. Conversely, male household tasks are generally not as long (Edmonds, 2005), more independent and infrequent and considered of higher value (Del Rosario, 1993) which deserve payment. As a result, boys (and girls) realise that male work "has monetary value, while girls' work does not" (Plan, 2011). Even outside the domestic context, as revealed by Boas and Hatloy's study (2008) on children in diamond mining, girls mainly provide support functions to other (male) workers (like preparing food, providing water, and selling basic commodities to workers).

The major feature of female labour is that it evokes and implies the ideal woman's work as being at the service of others (especially men). Women's work demands adherence to a gendered role as

caregiver and entertainer (Rushing, 2006) and emphasises the concept of obedient, passive, sensual, and docile women who, obligingly, provide services. Within commercial sexual exploitation, sex is perceived as one of these services that women/girls can and ought to provide.

## Girls' commodification

When sex is seen as a service which can be sold, bought and exploited as a form of entertainment, people's bodies are treated as goods (Poulin, 2003). Human beings – especially women and children – become raw resources for global sexual exploitation. Worldwide, there is a culture in which "women's [and girls'] bodies are used to market consumer products and (...) women and girls themselves are products to be consumed" (Hughes, 2000). In this context, the increased development of an image of a woman as an object makes it easier to continuously violate (Meganck, 2011) and exploit her.

As it has been shown, the objectification and commodification of a girl's body is most evident within the entertainment industry and the market created around tourist areas, where girls are exposed to direct contact with buyers, who have the freedom to choose the "product" they prefer. The industrialisation of sex in the service and entertainment sectors has developed in order to meet different demands (Poulin, 2003).

Children are simply one of the “products” sold in this market; indeed one of the most lucrative. Thus it is found that exploiters and clients see women and girls as goods/objects from which to profit (monetarily or for sexual pleasure), and girls may perceive the provision of sexual services as a duty. So the commodification of women functions in two opposing but ultimately co-operative ways: by devaluing and demanding women’s work and sexual services, and yet simultaneously creating a market in which women are the commodities to be sold and by which to gain profit. This ambivalence makes women cheap to provide and easy to supply.

Why does this commodification rarely happen to men/boys? The main reason can be seen in terms of market: demand factors, in addition to the gender structures identified above, make girls more vulnerable to this type of exploitation (Rushing, 2006). Moreover, female sexuality is a far more marketable and a far more valuable commodity than male sexuality in the modern world. This is true because, on the one

hand the market identifies women and girls as objects to be looked at and/or desired and, on the other consistently portrays masculine predator images. So it is no surprise that the vast majority of CSEC abusers are male.

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## Remarks and recommendations

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This short investigation into the vulnerabilities of children involved in labour to commercial sexual exploitation opened with a premise: the factors compelling a child to search for work are factors of vulnerability themselves (poverty, abusive family context, migration

etc.). The position occupied by a child in search for, or engaged in, labour is a hazardous one, which places the child in a position of inferiority and vulnerability. Naturally, the risks linking child labour and CSEC vary depending on the work environments. Certain areas are considered more perilous than others. This article focused its analysis only on those sectors in which the connection to CSEC has been recognised as greater, both in relation to work which implies contact with the public and in private settings.

In the entertainment industry, including service and tourism sectors, the danger has been traced as coming precisely from contact with the public. This is especially true in relation to work where physical contact and body performances are the norm (adult commercial sex venues, karaoke bars, dance bars, massage parlors, etc.). A risk, however, can also arise in less explicit circumstances (common bars, hotels, restaurants, etc.). The street represents another vicious location for child workers. Here the danger emanates from

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**Girls may perceive the provision of sexual services as a “duty.”**



the direct exposure to potential criminals and the shortage of protection. Conversely, the risks connected with the private sector (especially in relation to domestic work) derive exactly from the isolation from society, from the liberty “to abuse” that this separation guarantees to the offender, and the power dynamics that may arise between child and employer or other adults.

Some gender discourses explain the higher risk of commercial sexual exploitation of children in relation to girls. It has been underlined that girls represent the larger group of workers in the majority of the analysed high-risk work environments (entertainment industry, services, tourism, and domestic work). Traditional ideas of gender roles can explain the higher vulnerability of child workers in “female” labour in relation to its perception as less worthy, or merely supportive of male work. It also generally recalls ideas of passive, submissive and docile women, who provide services to others (especially to men) as a matter of duty, especially when paid. Sexual performances are considered among these services, and as so, intensify the objectification of women’s bodies, which can be bought and sold. The vulnerabilities related to boys are different: the isolation deriving from the inferior recognition of CSEC’s risk to boys, the greater difficulty they encounter in asking for help, and the complexity related to the investigation of the phenomenon.

The connection between child labour and commercial sexual exploitation of children is often overshadowed by the other risks associated with child labour. It is not possible to draw up a list of priorities in the fight against (the risks of) child labour. All the dangers, especially those associated with the controversial category of hazardous work, must be tackled with the same urgency. However, we should bear in mind that the risks related to commercial sexual exploitation of children are potentially permanent, given the difficulty in escaping the vicious cycle of exploitation, and the serious physical and psychological consequences this trauma inflicts on its victims.

Therefore, more attention should be given to the analysis of the vulnerability and the links that bind child labour and commercial sexual exploitation. Having analysed the peculiarities of the different risk sectors, the need for targeted actions emerges. In those areas where the link between child labour and CSEC is clear, or at least more explicit, a stronger hand in the implementation of laws is a must: commercial sexual exploitation is a crime and must be prosecuted. Difficulties may arise in areas where this association is more concealed. Consequently, more research and concrete investigations must be carried out, to explore the size of the problem and work on preventive actions.

A fundamental step in protecting children from labour and commercial sexual exploitation is the universal ratification and effective implementation of the principles enumerated in the ILO conventions, including Minimum Age Convention No. 138 and the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention No. 182, as well as ILO’s International Programme on Child Labour (IPEC).

The gender analysis of this article and the examined differences point to the need for a gender-differentiated approach in the mitigation of child labour vulnerability to CSEC. A gender-oriented approach should be visible both through designed legislations in relation to different work sectors and in all the other necessary actions, such as research and the planning of prevention strategies (ILO, 2003).

Prevention of the motivating factors at the origin of the vast numbers of working children is a key factor for a gradual elimination of child labour. Broad steps are necessary to address poverty (UNICEF, 2001). Children are the first victims and, at the same time, can become transmitters of poverty through parenthood, resulting in potentially perpetuating the vicious cycle of poverty (UNICEF, 2000). Investing in child protection, education, training and, when necessary, reintegration, is a primary element for the development of a generation able to give better life perspective to its children.

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# Visible yet Unseen: The Vulnerability of Street Children to Sexual Exploitation

Mark Capaldi

## Introduction

Children living and working on the streets are some of the most excluded and at-risk persons in the world and they are found in almost every major city or large town. In shopping centres, market places, transport hubs and thoroughfares, they can be seen begging, selling small items such as cigarettes or newspapers, shoe shining, rubbish collecting or baggage carrying. Securing their daily basic needs and protecting themselves from the hostilities and vulnerability of the streets is a perpetual struggle and it often means enduring sexual abuse and exploitation. The reality of neglect evidenced by the shockingly high number of children surviving on the street across the world runs counter to the principles enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which provide for the protection of children's overall well being, dignity and emotional and physical integrity.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), referring to the sexual abuse of a child in exchange for money or in-kind, is defined by ILO Convention 182 as one of the

worst forms of child labour. This includes child prostitution, child pornography/child sexual abuse materials, sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes. It is commonly accepted that a child cannot consent freely to have sexual intercourse with an adult, including children surviving on the street. Therefore, in such cases, they should be considered victims and afforded the necessary protection.

Sexual exploitation of children from the streets can take place behind closed doors, but as is often the case and as the label 'street children' suggests, it can also occur in public areas, such as roads, beaches, markets or parks; usually the sex offender approaches the young victim in order to have a sexual relationship. More boys are thought to be involved in street-based sexual exploitation than girls, as opposed to the higher number of girls that are exploited in private places, such as brothels or other establishments (Hatloy and Huser, 2005; Renault, 2006; WHO, n.d.a).

Street children generally fall into three categories. Some children run away from home and live independently on the streets. Others may be street working children who

fend for themselves by day, but return to their families at night. Still others live with their families on the street. This paper aims to expose the extent and scope of the multiple vulnerabilities of street children, in particular to sexual exploitation. It describes the trajectory towards sexual exploitation that children surviving on the street fall into and it highlights the limited prevention and protection measures afforded to these vulnerable children by state actors and other duty-bearers. The article ends by calling for comprehensive prevention and street-based programmes that are supported by a wide collaboration of stakeholders and protection responses.



## Understanding the phenomenon of street children and the links to child labour

The interweaving economic and psychosocial conditions that drive children to the streets are a complex worldwide phenomenon. Contrary to stereotypes, the problem of street children is not only prevalent in the Global South. In fact, many children in the Global North are also working and living on the streets, such as the Roma population or children fleeing from oppressive conditions in their



families and communities (Volpi, 2002; Delap, 2009; Gamble, 2010; ECPAT International, 2012a). While urban migration and poverty are frequently cited as the major causes of street children, the breakdown of traditional family and community structures as well as dysfunctional or abusive families are contributing factors to the alarmingly high number of children on the streets.

Street children, orphans, children running away from domestic abuse, child victims of armed conflict or natural disaster, children coming from poor families with low levels of education or from marginalised society and minorities are especially vulnerable to ending up on the streets. Many of them, lacking parental or community support, are pushed to the streets to contribute to household income, to escape neglect or to provide for themselves or family members.

An over-cited – and most likely unverifiable – estimate, used for over two decades, is that the number of street children runs to tens of millions worldwide (Ayuku, 2003; Dillon, 2008; Thomas de Benitz, 2011) and that the numbers are increasing due to the affects of globalisation and urban migration (UNICEF, 2006). The scale of the problem, while difficult to quantify, varies globally and while most of these street children may live in developing countries, industrialised countries are not immune to this crisis. Collecting accurate statistics on street children is difficult due to challenges such as their mobility, distrust of strangers, the sensitive nature of their work and generally poor disaggregation of collected

data (WHO, 2000; Thomas de Benitz, 2011).

The profile of street children depicted in many studies shows that the majority are boys. Different factors contribute to this reality: the propensity of boys to run away from dysfunctional and abusive family environments is higher (Agnihotri, 2001) and girls are more prone to trafficking or being kept off the streets and otherwise exploited (Hatloy and Huser, 2005; Renault, 2006; WHO, n.d.a).

Ranging from 5 to 18 years of age, both boys and girls can work on the streets from 6 to 14 hours a day (Volpi, 2002; Thomas de Benitz, 2011). Their most common jobs include begging or working in the informal sector: hawking in the markets; carrying boxes and luggage at bus and train stations or in front of hotels and shopping malls; car window washing; selling flowers, trinkets, sweets, newspapers, books, and a myriad of other innovative ways of making money. A street child can do a variety of jobs in one day: shoe shining in the morning, scavenging in the afternoon and begging at night. Some of the hazards they face living and working on the streets include sickness, physical injuries, street fights, harassment, verbal abuse, addiction to substance abuse and sexual exploitation by pedophiles and sex abusers. To cope with these hazards, they often join gangs as a source of support and protection. These gangs can introduce them to activities such as gambling, pick pocketing, thievery and prostitution (Volpi, 2002; Thomas de Benitz, 2011). Street children are frequently

mistreated, imprisoned and in some countries even killed (UNICEF, 2004; Thomas de Benitz, 2011). Suicide attempts and morbidity rates of street children are especially high (WHO, n.d.a).

## The working conditions of street children and the vulnerability to CSEC

The working conditions faced by street children in cities and towns across the world define the vulnerabilities and abuses to which they can fall victim (Volpi, 2002; UNICEF, 2006; Save the Children, 2011). Their abundant numbers, the absence of a parent or guardian's watchful eye and their daily struggle for survival contribute to the ease with which they can be exploited.

Street children generally work long hours to eke out the most basic needs for survival and the idea that commercial sex could generate a higher income can draw them into such exploitative situations (Gamble, 2010). Children can often

lack the necessary knowledge or experience to anticipate danger and isolation from family and a care system renders them easily manipulated. Prostitution of children on the streets is often referred to as 'survival sex,' generally meaning involvement in occasional sex activities in exchange for money or when sex is exchanged for food, shelter or protection (UNAIDS, n.d.a). This phenomenon of child street prostitution is observed in the Global North in communities of homeless children as well as street children in the Global South. Children might also become victims of sexual exploitation because of peer pressure, threats or violence. These children also often have other problems such as substance addiction or other behavioural problems. Nevertheless, selling sex on the streets is used as the last option by many street children, who try other activities before being pushed into prostitution (ECPAT International, 2008a).

Public places are common contact sites for sexual exploitation. For example, in Pakistan, transport hubs are often linked with the sexual exploitation of children. In fact, bus terminals serve as both a congregating point for street and runaway children as well as a venue to sell sex. Public female prostitution in Pakistan is almost non-existent, but boys as young as 7 years old can be seen at bus stands scouring for passengers in search of lodging for the night. It is well known that men at these public places are looking for boys to have sexual intercourse with in exchange for money. The boys usually stay in hotels near the bus stands, where they are also abused by the owners

or other customers (Sahil, 2004). Clients prefer young boys since they are easily available and cheaper than women selling commercial sex. Children are also exploited by bus and truck drivers – in trucks or hotel rooms – in exchange for money, food or hashish (ECPAT International, 2011a).

The various forms of CSEC are closely interlinked and impact one another. Moreover, in the case of prostitution of street children, the sex purchased can include a whole variety of exploitative sex acts, including touching, talking, looking, feeling as well as posing for/looking at 'pornography', or 'Cybersex,' or sex tourism (ECPAT International, 2011b). Reports from the Philippines, for example, have identified an established trend of pedophiles using 'internet sex dens,' which often entice children off the streets, for real-time viewing of child sex crimes (ECPAT International, 2011c).

The sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism is a massive phenomenon that occurs both domestically as well as trans-nationally (ECPAT International, 2008b). It occurs in many places, such as hotels, brothels or even beaches. Many children exploited by tourists are street children or children living without community protection. One of the main issues contributing to continuing high incidences of sexual exploitation of children in tourism is lack of prosecutions. Child sex tourists will more likely travel to places where they have less chance of being detected by authorities because of weak law enforcement agencies or high levels of corruption. In

One of the main issues contributing to continuing high incidences of sexual exploitation of children in tourism is lack of prosecutions.

the many countries where the phenomenon of street children is prevalent and there is little attention paid or services to protect them, it is more likely that a tourist will find a victim to abuse (ECPAT International, 2008b; ECPAT International, 2011d; ECPAT International, 2011e; ECPAT International, 2012b). Even if children are identified as victims, there is a huge lack of structures to keep them secure. Also, law enforcement authorities and social welfare services lack the resources, or in some cases the commitment, to protect street children.

Consequently, child sex abusers remain free from prosecution and justice is not secured for the victims (ECPAT International, 2008b).

Finally, sexual abuse within groups of street children is frequently reported with substance addiction used by older boys as a method to entice younger ones into sex (WHO, n.d.a; Save the Children, 2011). Some street girls may agree

to have sex with street boys in an attempt to negotiate some form of overall protection, although most sex between street children of both genders is frequently done under threat of violence (Moazzam et. al., 2004; Celik and Baybuga, 2009; Save the Children, 2011). In a study on street children in Sudan, street boys boasted of their sexual prowess with stories of gang rape of street girls in drainage tunnels (Kudrati, et. al., 2008).

## Making the 'unseen' visible: the need for relevant protection and care services

Street children need recognition of their rights, access to public and social welfare services and legal protection. It's essential that States meet/fulfill their obligations under international human rights instruments and assure children's welfare in preserving their rights.

Children living and working on the streets are generally denied access to basic services (such as health

and education) and they struggle to find basic sanitation and safe drinking water. They are exposed to the elements and an environment that is generally unhygienic and unhealthy without proper food, shelter and even clothing.

One of the major threats that street children face is verbal and physical abuse. A large number of street children report undergoing some form of abuse such as beatings, harassment, cursing, theft of their savings or the goods they are selling and of course, sexual abuse (Celik and Baybuga, 2009; Thomas de Benitz, 2011; Save the Children, 2011). Treated as delinquents, these threats often come from the adults responsible for protecting them such as the police, health workers or parents (Thomas de Benitz, 2011).

The presence of state run programmes, NGO interventions and other initiatives that access this target group are generally very limited. Where they do exist, the majority of the care and protection services tend to be provided by small, unregulated NGOs operating with few resources. Service delivery to street children is often hampered by their mobility and hard to reach nature, their general distrust of officials and institutions and periodic government sweeps to clean up the streets of vagrants, which positions them more as a social nuisance than as child victims with rights. Furthermore, protection systems and care services can be compromised of a lack of skills and knowledge and influenced by corruption.

Nevertheless, drop-in centres and

out-reach services can provide an entry point to basic services, including shelter, food, medical and psychological assistance, education, and reintegration projects. These projects can help sustain children on the street and protect them from high risk behaviours, as well as raise awareness and work in a preventive way in order to prevent children from ending up homeless (BCN, n.d.a). They can also tap into the remarkable resilience that these children often demonstrate in the face of extreme adversity during their daily struggle for survival (Thomas de Benitz, 2011).

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## Conclusion and recommendations

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Although there may be cultural differences, the phenomenon of street children is worldwide. While studies on street children reveal risk factors that are universal, such as poverty, family violence and abuse, urbanisation and dropping out of school – which can be useful in identifying high-risk families – there is also a need to recognise that they are not a homogenous group as they are involved in a variety of work which can propel them into a trajectory of sexual abuse and exploitation.

Comprehensive measures to protect

street children must therefore be developed and implemented through a wide collaboration of stakeholders (governmental institutions, non-governmental organisations, service providers, child protection institutions, communities, private sector and the affected children themselves). Of priority are street-based services to improve street children's health and safety.

Prevention and protection begins with clearly understanding the causes pushing children to leave their homes, identifying the most at-risk children and adopting strategies to support family and community placements. Preventing children from becoming victims of sexual exploitation requires the active mobilisation of persons responsible for their protection, such as family, community and the State, through its system of child protection, social welfare and justice. For example, communities must work to lower school drop-out rates of these most vulnerable children. Education is an important means to protect children and at the same time reduce the risk for them to be abused or exploited. While at school, children are not on the streets risking abuse and exploitation, but most of all, education gives them sufficient knowledge and skills to face future difficulties.

Prevention and awareness raising activities should not only be directed at families and schools, but to the community as a whole. Health centres, vendors, restaurant staff, anybody who may come in contact with children working on the streets, should assist in alerting authorities of at-risk situations. Similarly, it's necessary to establish referral mechanisms so

that identified children can receive adequate care and assistance.

Inside governmental agencies, it's essential that persons who come in contact with exploited children adopt codes of conduct, implement child protection policies and ensure child safe training to safeguard children and youth, and avoid putting them in situations of further harm. It's also essential to ensure that child victims of sexual exploitation and those living on the streets are not identified or treated as criminals. Law enforcement institutions should provide special procedures in order to protect victims of exploitation. Children do not consent to be sexually abused and should receive adequate attention to avoid additional stigmatisation and re-victimisation. Perpetrators of abuse and exploitation of street children should be brought to justice.

With rapid population growth, widespread poverty and inequalities, and unstable socio-economic growth around the world, the magnitude and vulnerabilities of street children can be expected to continue, if not increase. The problem is visible in huge numbers in cities and towns the world over and it is an unsavory reminder of the socio-economic pressures and social injustices that make up the darker side of globalisation. What remain hidden are the children's daily struggles against violence, sexual abuse and exploitation. Street children's mobility and vagrancy should no longer be a barrier to protection, access to services and the realisation of their rights.



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