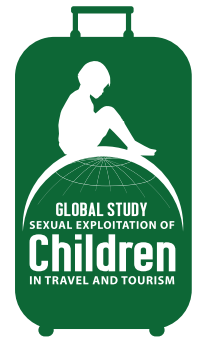


EXPERT PAPER



SEXUAL EXPLOITATION OF CHILDREN BY TRAVELLING WORKERS IN THE SOLOMON ISLANDS

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INTRODUCTION



Save the Children

Save the Children Australia has recently released *Dynamics of Child Trafficking and Commercial Exploitation in Solomon Islands: A Cross Provincial Study*, the first report to look into this issue in the Solomon Islands. Broadly, the purpose of the report was to better understand the context of child trafficking and determine the extent of commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) in the Solomon Islands.

The majority of Solomon Islands' Gross Domestic Product or GDP, is derived from primary industries such as agriculture, logging and fishing. According to the Solomon Islands government, logging is the primary export, accounting for around 60 percent of export earnings and constituting 17 percent of the economy and 16 percent of government revenue (SIG Foreign Investment Division, 2015). Fishing, logging and other extractive industries largely employ foreign men, predominantly from Asia. With primary industries playing such a large role in the economic and political outlook of the Solomon Islands, Save the Children has commissioned research looking into the impact this is having on children in their communities.

The recently released Trafficking in Persons Report (Department of State, USA, 2015) acknowledges the following problem in terms of CSEC of children in the Solomon Islands' primary industries, saying 'Local children are subjected to prostitution and forced labour within the country. Children are subjected to prostitution, sometimes in exchange for money or fish, particularly near foreign logging camps, on foreign and local commercial fishing vessels, and at hotels and entertainment establishments. Some parents sell their children to foreign workers at logging and mining companies for marriage; some of these girls are later forced into domestic servitude and prostitution. Local boys and girls are put up for "informal adoption" by their families in order to pay off debts; some are subsequently subjected to sexual servitude by the adopted family or guardians, or forced labour as domestic servants.' (p. 307).

While Save the Children conducted initial baseline assessments in 500 households of children at risk of exploitation where logging and fishing industries are active, it is hoped that further follow up research by Save the Children and its partners can further understanding and increase action at the local, provincial and policy level to address this issue.

Understanding CSEC in the Solomon Islands

Throughout our research it has been found that child trafficking and CSEC are hard to detect in the Solomon Islands. This is partly because there is no obvious use of force as seen in other Pacific regions, such as the drugging or kidnapping of children. There is hardly any presence found of a third party that would usually be involved in child trafficking and CSEC, such as

recruitment agencies. In contrast to this, we have found that child trafficking operates in the Solomon Islands through a highly fragmented manner without an organised structure of the commodity chain, and often draws upon the manipulation of the consent of trafficked victims.

A regional report conducted by the United Nations Children's Agency (UNICEF), the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) and End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT) in 2006 and 2007 points out that it is a common feature in the Pacific that children of both sexes are sold through improper marriages and informal adoption for both commercial and non-commercial, and sexual and non-sexual purposes. The Solomon Islands is not an exception to this.

Social practices such as customary marriage and informal adoption are utilised to set up the socially acceptable context in which sexual and labour exploitation is induced and rampant. For this reason a profound knowledge of customary values and cultural practices are needed to fully understand the nature of exploitation that children face.

In light of this challenging context, two key research questions were identified to draw out feasible answers and basic information regarding child trafficking and CSEC:

1. *What are the characteristics of children and family involved/at risk of child trafficking and CSEC in the selected target areas of the Solomon Islands?*
2. *How do child marriage and informal adoption practices reinforce vulnerability of children to child trafficking and CSEC in selected areas of the Solomon Islands?*

The study was carried out over three months in three of the nine provinces of the Solomon Islands: Malaita, Choiseul and Guadalcanal, including the capital Honiara where logging and fishing industries are visible and in close proximity to local communities.

The research was conducted with and endorsed by the National Advisory Committee on Children (NACC) which includes the Solomon Islands Ministry of Women, Children and Youth Affairs, UNICEF, International Labour Organization (ILO), Family Support Centres and Christian Care Centres.

A mix of qualitative and quantitative methods was used throughout the study. Household surveys were conducted with female heads of households, children and youths across 500 households from which 1,591 were below 18 years of age. Focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews were held with key stakeholders and with children and young people directly affected.

It was found through our research and in our recently released Child Rights Situational Analysis that issues such as child labour, child marriage, informal adoption and sexual abuse of children are interconnected and cannot be considered separately. For example, our research shows that some girls in the researched communities are taking up work as domestic helpers to pursue livelihood opportunities. This is often encouraged or approved of by their families. However, once working as house girls, they experience a high risk of being forced into becoming de facto wives as their relationship with their employers evolve to include transactional sex. Because of the complex nature of the enabling environment, a nuanced approach is needed to understand the ways that children in Solomon Islands are vulnerable to human trafficking and CSEC.

The research showed that certain socio-economic indicators further enhance the risks of child trafficking and CSEC in the presence of logging and fishing industries in communities. For instance, when household members are unemployed, children are more likely to go logging and/or to fishery sites to explore opportunities to earn money. Research findings confirm that children may go to these sites to engage in vending activities and small jobs for foreign and local loggers and/or fishermen in exchange for cash, alcohol, or other goods. Furthermore, while child marriage (under 18 years of age) has been practiced in the past, a relatively new phenomenon in the Solomon Islands is girls as young as 13 years old being married off to loggers. Previously, child marriage was granted only after particular rites of passage rituals were successfully performed in accordance with customs. However, the presence of wealthy foreigners in the logging and fishing industries are reshaping community attitudes towards marriages due to the financial impact these industries have on communities.

The double standards between men and women that are attached to sexuality and marriage codes in Solomon Islands cultural contribute to an environment that generally weakens women's intra-household bargaining power, and as a result, reinforces vulnerability of girls and women to exploitation. In particular, findings in Choiseul Province illustrate the alarming influence of gender power relations involved in the recruitment of girls for transactional sex with logging workers. Girls are pressured into accepting offers from their male peers acting as Solair, or a person acting as go-between or messenger who intermediates transactional sex. The pressure emerges from pervasive gender discrimination within communities where girls are secondary in gender power hierarchy to boys. Consequently, denying an offer from boys in this context implies challenging the male authority and could result in possible

isolation from the peer network. In addition, focus group discussions revealed that other underlying factors for girls accepting offers from Solairs included the appeal of financial gain, the sense of boosting self-esteem through being with foreigners, or the possibility of marriage with a foreigner, which would bring high social status for her and her family.

Analysis from key stakeholder meetings with law enforcement authorities presented an alarming trend. Since there are limited shelter or support programs for children who have been victim to child trafficking and CSEC and other forms of abuse in general, these children often continue to engage in transactional sex with foreign workers and locals. As a result, these children are seen by some law enforcement authorities to be choosing this path and as willing participants. This is a serious policy drawback that needs to be addressed to ensure discriminatory perceptions and behaviours against survivors of child trafficking and CSEC are changed. Not only is child trafficking and CSEC against the law in the Solomon Islands, but holding children accountable for making decisions that lead to commercial sexual exploitation and human trafficking have repressive consequences which limit other educational and livelihood opportunities for these children. As such, the research concluded that an overarching policy provision is needed that removes the accountability from victimized children and protects their welfare affected by the logging and fishing industries. The needs of children, particularly in relation to child protection from child trafficking and CSEC issues, must be met with sharper policy intervention that addresses children as primary beneficiaries and their specific needs. For more detailed information,

please refer to the Save the Children 2015 report entitled *Dynamics of Child Trafficking and the Sexual Exploitation of Children in Solomon Islands*.

Current responses to the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism

Highly organised forms of trafficking of children for sexual exploitation, such as that are reported in Papua New Guinea or PNG for instance, is not a striking feature witnessed in the Solomon Islands (UNICEF 2006). However, although the industry is not highly organised, it is still present and includes foreign nationals, logging and fishing workers and sadly, boys and girls.

The recently released Trafficking in Persons Report 2015 (Department of State, USA, 2015) lists the Solomon Islands as a Tier 2 Watch List country, which means that the Solomon Islands Government does not fully comply with the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking; however, it is making significant efforts to do so.

The 2012 Immigration Act is the first legislation in the Solomon Islands to be enacted that directly addresses offences related to people trafficking and people smuggling in the country. It prohibits transnational forms of trafficking, and conducted multiagency team inspections at logging and fisheries sites to detect the presence of trafficking. While this is welcome it should be noted that the government, however, has not yet moved to prosecute any suspected traffickers or identify and protect trafficking victims. The government also did not allocate funding for national anti-trafficking efforts.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully explicate the legal and policy environment of CSEC in the Solomon Islands it should be noted that Save the Children recommends that further reforms of the Penal Code, Islanders Marriage Act and the Islanders Divorce Act are needed to address areas of sexual exploitation of children and forced commercial marriage.

Apart from policy and a change in political will greater awareness and support is needed at the community level. Save the Children Solomon Islands has been provisionally funded by the European Union to deliver a programme to prevent and protect children from commercial sexual exploitation in Guadalcanal, Western Province and Choiseul in partnership with

Save the Children Denmark, HOPE Trust as well as working in sectoral collaboration with the NAACC.

The programme will train and work with teachers and community educators to increase the resilience and advocacy campaigns around children who could be at risk of CSEC. It will work with parents and caregivers to increase their knowledge of children's specific vulnerability.

We will be conducting a baseline assessment of this issue, which will add valuable rigour to current research in this area and further help the government and civil society to protect vulnerable children from sexual exploitation. Through taking a broader sectoral approach to dealing with this issue, we hope to make communities safer for the children living in the Solomon Islands.

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ABOUT SAVE THE CHILDREN SOLOMON ISLANDS

Save the Children Solomon Islands (SCSI) was established in 1986. With a strong history of programmes in the health sector, SCSI has also worked in the areas of community education and training, youth participation and empowerment, direct promotion of child rights and building the capacity of the government to implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Currently SCSI works across child protection, youth outreach and livelihood programs, disaster risk reduction, school board strengthening, early childhood education as well as water, sanitation and health. Save the Children works in Honiara and Malaita, Guadalcanal, Western and Choiseul provinces. Its head office is Save the Children Australia based in Melbourne.

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