



## News

### Child prostitution widespread in Jamaica

#### Study shows even 10 year-olds involved

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Children, some as young as 10 and 11 years old, are engaged in prostitution like these ladies above and left. (Observer library photos) AN International Labour Organisation (ILO) study on the worst forms of child labour in Jamaica has unearthed a disturbing practice of widespread prostitution by children, some as young as 10 years old, in six of the island's 14 parishes.



According to the study, conducted in June 2000, "the majority of children involved in prostitution and related activities were girls and there was a gender division of labour in some sexual activities".

The researchers recommended that the Jamaican government strengthen a 1999 child care and protection bill to classify as a criminal offence, the use of children in prostitution.

They also suggested the formation of a national machinery to work in collaboration with a child labour elimination programme to eradicate the worst forms of child labour.

The national machinery, the researchers suggested, should include representatives of working children, government agencies, non-governmental organisations



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working with street children, trade unions, private sector groups and international development agencies.

Public education programmes aimed at policy makers, parliamentarians, the judiciary and the general public were also recommended by the researchers.



The study listed nine categories of children engaging in sex for gain and said they were pushed basically by lack of economic support, love and affection.

The nine categories listed were:

- \* children living and working on the streets, mostly boys between ages 12 and 18;
- \* children in formal prostitution and treated as adults;
- \* children, between 15 and 18 years, in seasonal prostitution, usually seeking to earn money to meet their wants as opposed to basic needs;
- \* go-go dancers, most between 13 and 18 years old;
- \* massage parlour workers, all females, usually with a secondary education and aged between 15 and 18 years;
- \* 'sugar daddy' girls, some below 12 years, who were pressured into sexual relations with adult males;
- \* 'chapses' -- teenaged boys who were having sexual relationships with older women known as 'sugar mummies' who, through their affluence, provide economic support, access to education and a higher standard of living;
- \* children used in pornographic productions, including live sex shows; and
- \* children used in sacrificial sex. This, however, could not be verified, the researchers said, but noted that if true, would represent an extreme form of exploitation.

"The psychological trauma and migratory character associated with such practices are mind boggling," the study said.

According to the researchers, these activities are considered to be among the worst forms of child

labour because they:

- \* sexually exploit children;
- \* violate their basic rights;
- \* disrupt their education;
- \* expose them to high-risk, life-threatening behaviour;
- \* socialise them into treating their bodies as sexual commodities for sale; and
- \* corrupt their moral values.

While the study did not state definitively how many children were involved in prostitution, the researchers said they consulted 269 persons, 129 of whom were children. The remainder, 140, were adult stakeholders.

Montego Bay, Negril, Savanna-la-Mar, Lucea, Spanish Town, Portmore and Kingston were used as the primary locations for data collection and the researchers conducted 73 interviews, held 15 focus group discussions and three workshops.

They also made observations at 35 spots in the seven locations and said that another 45 locations across the island were identified through reports from stakeholders.

Said the study: "In the seven locations surveyed, children between the ages of 10 and 18 years were exposed to prostitution, pornographic performances and other activities that adversely affect their health, safety and morals. These activities took place in private (household) as well as public spaces, suggesting that nowhere was safe for the children."

Of the children categorised as being involved in formal prostitution, the study said the majority were girls, but boys, primarily in homosexual relationships, were also identified.

"As with adult sex workers, some girls... operated from established brothels, while others operated from bars, massage parlours or go-go clubs," the study said.

It also identified shopping malls, food courts, fast food restaurants, cruise ship ports and beaches as among the spots where these children would solicit and pick-up clients.

Some girls, the study added, operated from their homes and provided sexual services to regular clients. The researchers also said they interviewed "a few girls" who said that their mothers were their pimps and managers.

"Exploitation of very young children was very disturbing," the study said, "and the age range for girls engaged in prostitution in tourist areas was as young as 10 or 11 years."

The study also identified girls in the 10 and 11 age group having sex with local male clients on the fishing beach in one rural location studied, "sometimes in exchange for as little as a fish".

While the researchers said that they did not find any evidence of children who were physically forced into prostitution, they said there was "ample evidence of several who felt forced by their economic circumstances".

Among the main causes established by the study as push factors were:

- \* economic poverty, unemployment and limited job opportunities for young people and their parents;
- \* poor parenting and adolescent parenting;
- \* poor family values, which contribute to inter-generational prostitution and go-go dancing being promoted as viable lifestyles;
- \* peer pressure;
- \* early sexual exposure;
- \* fear of reprisals from community dons and people in power, which make some women tolerate situations that adversely affect the rights of their children;
- \* ascribing adult roles to children, such as giving them responsibility for the care and support of their family, including younger siblings, therefore forcing them to act like adults;
- \* limited education, low levels of literacy;
- \* undetected learning disabilities which affect children's ability to cope with the school system so they drop out;
- \* newspaper advertisements seeking girls to work in massage parlours but there is little monitoring to

ensure that children are not employed;

\* untreated psychological problems;

\* weak monitoring of laws and legal loopholes that create an enabling environment for child pornography to flourish; and

\* children searching for love, comfort, belonging and security.

These findings, the study argued, underscore the urgent need for Jamaica to ratify ILO conventions 182 and 138 which complement earlier children's rights standards set by the ILO, four of which have already been ratified by Jamaica.

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