

What's happening to our children? A closer look at global sexual exploitation

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Section editor's note: While taking the BCIT Forensic Nursing course instructed by Sheila Early, Tara was inspired to write a paper on the issue of global sexual exploitation of children. Since writing the paper, Tara plans to volunteer her nursing skills, knowledge and compassion in Thailand at a camp that protects 420 Akha children from sexual exploitation. Tara plans on reporting her experience once she returns.

The commercial sexual exploitation of children is a global issue. It's estimated that millions of children across the globe every year are being sexually exploited in forms such as prostitution, trafficking, and pornography for personal profit, and at the expense of the victim's own health and well-being. The purpose of this article is to create discussion, awareness, and insight amongst readers and to establish advocacy, prevention and protection of children. In this article, I will describe the forms of sexual exploitation and discuss who is being victimized, as well as depict the offenders. Factors that increase the incidence of child exploitation/abuse within established and developing countries will be identified. Also, this article will illustrate the psychological, physiological, and social impact that sexual violence has on children. In conclusion, the roles of forensic science and nursing and how they contribute to the eradication of sexual exploitation is discussed. Cross-continental measures are being taken to prevent and protect any child from being subjected to this trauma. Lastly, identification of efforts to support and reintegrate children who have already been sexually exploited is discussed.

Sexual exploitation is defined as a “fundamental violation of children’s rights and comprises sexual abuse by a person and remuneration in cash or kind to the child or to a third party or person. In addition to suffering all the consequences of sexual abuse, the child (male or female) is treated as a commodity, and the child’s body is sold to an abuser for the abuser’s sexual pleasure” (Barnitz, 2001). A form of sexual exploitation, child prostitution, is described as minors engaging in sexual activities with adults (Lynch, 2006). Sexual contact with a minor in the form of coercion, exposure, touching and/or sexual intercourse is a criminal offence in most countries. However, the consequences and seriousness of the crime vary globally (Lynch, 2006). Child trafficking is an offence in which children

are being coerced, bought, sold or kidnapped into the sex trade to become sexual slaves (NBC News Dateline, 2005). “Human trafficking also means the giving or receiving of payments and benefits to achieve the consent of the person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation, which includes prostitution, forced labour or services, slavery and servitude” (Berondo, 2005). Child pornography can be defined as “any visual or print medium depicting sexually explicit conduct involving children... [that involves] sexually explicit behaviour [in the form of] sexual intercourse, bestiality, masturbation, sadomasochistic abuse and lewd exhibition of the genitals and pubic area” (Lynch, 2006). New technologies such as the internet, digital cameras, and mobile forms have increased the distribution of child pornography (UNICEF, 2005). The internet has also made child sexual exploitation easily “accessible, anonymous, and affordable” (Duguay, 2005).

Children of all ages are at risk for sexual exploitation for many reasons such as poverty, inequality, discrimination, violence, criminality, lack of education and employment opportunities, mental illness and disabilities, substance abuse, victim accessibility (the internet), rural and urban growth, lack of laws and enforcement, societal views (children do not have HIV/AIDS) and traditions (child marriage), family dysfunction, political instability and war, tourism, and new technologies such as the internet (UNICEF, 2001). Other issues such as “force, trickery, bribes, threat[s] and lies” (UNICEF, 2005) also are involved in deceiving parents and luring children into the world of sexual exploitation. In established countries such as North America, factors such as substance abuse, violence, prior/ongoing sexual abuse, dysfunction with their own family, lack of educational and employment opportunities, victim accessibility via the internet and, in some regions, poverty are influential in the increased incidence of sexual exploitation (UNICEF, 2005). Within developing countries, all of the above root problems are influential in the incidence of sexual exploitation, poverty being at the forefront as it bears weight on most other factors. Sex tourism and victim accessibility via the internet are the newest, and vastly growing forms used by the offender to come in contact with the victim (UNICEF, 2005). “While it is unknown exactly how many children have been abused worldwide in cyberspace, the scale of the problem could be measured from the millions of child pornographic pictures that can be found on only one computer” (Assavanonda, 2005). Using chil-

dren to make pornography causes physical and psychological harm. "It also creates... [risk] for other children [to be exploited] through the normalization of images of sexual violence and a mainstream packaging of children as sexual commodities ready for consumption" (Assavanonda, 2005).

A common misnomer about sexual offenders/exploiters is that they are all pedophiles: "adults who are only sexually attracted to children and will commit abuse to fulfill their own desires" (UNICEF, 2005). Many offenders are not pedophiles but, instead, have sex with children because of availability, curiosity, and/or they do not question or care about the age of the child. The majority of the offenders are males who live "respectable lives" per se, which is an added factor as to why the offenders are not readily recognized within your community (UNICEF, 2005).

The psychological, physiological, and social impact left from sexual violence can be lifelong and life-threatening. Psychological effects such as self-blame, low self-esteem, decreased self-worth, anxiety, aggression, fear for one's own life or their own family's life, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicidal ideation and attempts are very common amongst children (Lynch, 2006). Within every type of abuse, the offender uses manipulation to victimize which, in turn, creates distrust for others, and a sense of insecurity and isolation for the victim (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2005). Physiological effects include, battery (roughly handled, bruises, fractures etc.), genital trauma, the transmission of sexually transmitted infections (HIV/AIDS and hepatitis are increasing at a phenomenal rate, especially in developing countries), pregnancy, malnutrition, substance abuse/dependency, and eating disorders (Lynch, 2006). There is also an increased risk of death associated with sexual exploitation. The societal impact stems from the psychological effects of low self-esteem and self-worth that can facilitate withdrawal from society. A societal view of someone who has been sexually abused varies from country to country but, in general, is not 100% supportive of the victim being innocent in the occurrence. There is a component of blame towards the victim. For example, someone (usually the perpetrator) may say that the children wanted to be prostitutes or that they chose this lifestyle in order to make money. There are other societal views that may recognize exploitation/abuse as a crime, but then contradict themselves by labelling the individual as unworthy. An example of this is in India, if a woman/child has been raped, they are deemed not a virgin and are considered unworthy of marriage. These individuals are either committed to a single life with their parents or, in extreme cases, have been murdered to honour the family name (Lynch, 2006).

In 1996, sexual exploitation amongst children was recognized for the first time globally at the World Congress. This provided a "landmark opportunity for representatives of governments and private organizations to learn about the problem and begin to consider interventions" (Barnitz, 2001). Representatives from 124 countries decided to develop a standardized plan to provide a global definition of sexual exploitation, enhance local

and international law enforcement, and provide awareness, education and advocacy amongst the public. The congress also encouraged youth participation in the action plan, as well as considering root problems that could facilitate the occurrence of abuse. The main point established at the 1996 World Congress of great importance was that this is not an issue that can be addressed independently within each individual country (Barnitz, 2001). Five years later, the second World Congress was held to review progress of objectives made previously, identify gaps and new roadblocks, and enhance political and global commitment to the fight against sexual exploitation. At this gathering, there were 3,050 participants, which included 136 government delegates, non-government organizations, private sector organizations, and 100 youth. This turnout alone is significant as it shows global awareness has increased, and that many countries are ready to protect the children. The downside of the second World Congress was that information regarding the overall impact of the 1996 initiatives to combat the sexual exploitation of children was limited and vague. Sexual exploitation has been around for hundreds of years and there has never been a set plan of action to attack this problem. Therefore, as frustrating as it is, change can only occur as fast as the issues are brought forth and addressed.

Within every facet of society, forensic science is intertwined. In addition to public involvement, professional bodies such as health care professionals, law enforcement, the judicial system and science need to come together as one to acknowledge, intervene, and eliminate sexual exploitation. It would be ideal to have law enforcement patrolling in droves looking for sex offenders or victims. However, the reality is that this is not completely possible. Public awareness worldwide is also a valuable tool that is not utilized enough. There are many other professions within our communities, such as teachers, that are involved with children, sometimes more often than one's own family, that need to be educated in prevention, recognition and intervention. Public, global and governmental efforts need to be made to enhance the importance of education and retention of children within the school system. Within this, global issues such as poverty and individual family necessities need to be evaluated to determine the causes of why children do not complete their education. Educating children also empowers them to recognize high-risk situations, which will aid in protection and prevention (Barnitz, 2001). It is beneficial for children to complete school so they are eligible for higher paying jobs later in life, which reduces their risk to be vulnerable at the hands of an offender. Another aspect of education is to encourage and support parents in receiving a higher education to decrease the need for children to work, and aid in supporting their family (Barnitz, 2001). In many developing countries, non-government organizations such as UNICEF are directly involved with children in crisis. This is an optimal opportunity to evaluate the health and well-being of the child and intervene. It has been estimated that in established and developing countries, a child who is sexually exploited will come in contact multiple times with health care professionals, especially within emergency departments and specialty areas. Therefore, this may be the only opportunity to identify the instance of sexual

violence (Lynch, 2006). Specifically within health care, the nurse's role is to develop a relationship with the patient in which they feel safe enough to divulge information. From this, accurate documentation of injuries is recorded and follow-up interventions can be initiated (social work, shelter, etc.). Advocacy for the patient and removal of the individual from the situation, along with reinforcement that the victim has the right to be safe and free from harm is also a necessary intervention (Lynch, 2006). Within established countries, the victim can be placed in the Witness Protection Program if future safety is an issue, and services such as counselling, therapy and financial benefits are considered (but unfortunately not always awarded). In all established countries, child welfare options are accessible, and advocacy groups such as non-government organizations (UNICEF), as well as orphanages, are options for placing the child in a safe environment. For the reintegration process, it was recognized at the first and second World Congress that more public and social support needs to be established to aid in getting children appropriate care, as well as preventing further exploitation. It was recognized at the 1996 World Congress that youth participation was vital in the war against exploitation to promote protection of their rights, and to facilitate youth as peer communicators and counselors (Barnitz, 2001). More recently within the travel industry, a Code of Conduct has been developed by UNICEF and distributed by airlines to provide information to travellers about sexual exploitation. Brochures and in-flight films educate them that sexual exploitation is illegal, punishable and morally and ethically wrong (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children, 2004). This information also educates them to identify and report any suspicious behaviour to authorities. Factors in prevention/protection also include increasing prison sentences for criminals of sexual crimes and providing more rehabilitation treatment for offenders. Currently, the rehabilitation treatment programs in some parts of North America are optional when, unquestionably, this should be a mandatory requirement for offenders. Globally, law enforcement has become more established with legislation. An example of this is Bill C-15A that seeks to combat global cyber crime and convict offenders in other countries (Foreign Affairs Canada, 2004). Recently, North American legislation has been established to convict offenders in their own country that have committed a sexual crime in another. During the last G8 summit, humanitarian aid to poverty-stricken countries was increased. Although not directly allotted to the fight against sexual exploitation, the financial aid will address root risk factors and, hopefully, have an indirect effect. More recognition and intervention of sexual exploitation needs to be brought to the forefront. Its personal, social and economical effects on society are just as detrimental as any other cause for which there is public advocacy. Recovery and reintegration of victims includes "strengthen[ing] the capabilities of social service and health personnel (including non-government organizations) in countries to assist young victims of sexual abuse and exploitation" (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific, 2004), prevention, recognition and intervention being key.

In summary, due to the dynamic nature of child sexual exploitation and its prevalence in every country around the world, a global plan has been established to raise awareness and continuity in prevention, protection, support and reintegration for children. There also needs to be global continuity so perpetrators are punished accordingly for their crimes. Due to the financial status of many developing countries, a global approach is the only way to assist in the quest to prevent sexual exploitation from occurring. In every country, root problems can differ and other issues such as substance abuse, street youth, family support and structure needs to be evaluated and resolutions initiated. With the start of recognition and intervention at the 1996 World Congress, identification amongst some countries has been made that will hopefully lead to more prevention, protection and support for children. Although sexual exploitation is a global issue, many countries, some of which have the highest rates of child sexual exploitation, still refuse to recognize this is a problem. Within the World Congress, it has been recognized that constant re-evaluation of the global plan is necessary to maintain progress in combating this despicable crime. ❏

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