

2-1990, 2:293-304, 1990

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CHILD PROSTITUTION — A GROWING MALAISE

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It seems that most of the children who are engaged in child prostitution in Sri Lanka are boys. Some of them are as young as seven years unlike in the case of girl prostitutes. But generally the boys seem to take up to prostitution at about the age of 12 and their active service, if you may call it that lasts till about the age of 19 - 20. Thereafter they are too old for the trade. They move away from the scene and subsequently become Managers and procure younger boys for the same trade. In fact some of them seem to have done pretty well in life and now they are respectable citizens.

A sociologist should make a study as to how extensive child prostitution is because we get to see only the people who get infected with sexually transmitted diseases when they come to us seeking treatment. But that is only the tip of the iceberg. A reputable sociologist has estimated that there are about 30,000 boy prostitutes in Sri Lanka. There is another estimate which places this number at 3,000. I believe that the correct estimate will be something inbetween.

Apparently Sri Lanka has a world wide reputation for boy prostitution. In fact this country is considered to be a haven for those people who

enjoy sex with children. Two other countries that have the same problem are Philippines (where in Manila they have a large number of boys who are engaged in child prostitution) and Bangkok. But from what I have seen in Bangkok the age group seems to be somewhat older than the children here. There, most of the male prostitutes are young adults rather than children whereas in Sri Lanka it is more or less the children.

Boy prostitutes seem to start on this trade apparently with the tacit consent of the parents. A few sociologists have reported to me that in most cases of child prostitution the parents are in the know and they have given their consent. This is an extraordinary disturbing development and we are trying to communicate with the parents and educate them about the dangers involved.

Boy prostitution is generally prevalent in the areas starting from a little North of Negombo and extending right upto Tangalle. There are also more affluent types coming from richer homes in the suburbs of Colombo. I would say that this trade is fairly wide spread along the western coast line which roughly corresponds to the tourist resort areas. In and around Colombo this seems to be mainly an activity that is patronised by the upper middle class and the middle class children. But in the tourist resort areas like Negombo and Hikkaduwa it's mainly poverty that drives these children into prostitution. There are cases of children who have been sexually

assaulted and abused, becoming prostitutes later. Boy prostitutes mainly cater to tourists. Therefore we have to educate our people about the dangers — specially now with the AIDS epidemic which is widespread in a number of countries. The tourists who come from those countries are a risk group because they may be carrying the AIDS virus.

Child prostitution can have a number of disastrous effects on the victims as well as on other children associating with them. The children who engage in this trade sometimes collect a lot of money and they get used to an affluent life style. This attracts other children too who are known to drop out of school and take to prostitution as a result. Then there's the psychological traumas which these child prostitutes will go through. They may not be able to adjust themselves once they move out of this trade. By that time they would have got addicted to the affluent life style and may be even drugs and as a result they will end up becoming young delinquents. Needless to say this is disastrous not only for the children concerned but also for the society as a whole.

I have not done any studies as such on the sociological aspects of child prostitution and my experience is limited to treating children who get infected with STDs. But based on my discussions with these children and also with sociologists who have carried out studies on these aspects, I tend to think that child prostitution is a highly organised trade. In fact the children are known to be transported from one area to another depending on demand.

As to whether we will be able to overcome the problem of child prostitution, will depend on our health education programmes — the impact it will have on the parents

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will be the decisive factor. If the parents can be persuaded to keep the children away from tourists and if they are able to manage economically without the money these children earn through prostitution then this problem can be handled. But if on the other hand the necessary impact of our educational programmes are not felt in these sensitive areas (the coastal belt

from Kochchikade to about Tangalle) and if the parents desperately need the money these children bring in then I suppose this problem will continue. As far as I know there aren't any rehabilitation programmes to help these child prostitutes either.

Finally I must refer to another aspect of child abuse. This involves both male children and female children. We can't blame that on the

tourists or foreigners, it is something that is done by our own people. Most of these people who abuse children sexually are mentally sick. Now that is worrying. I have seen children under one year who have been sexually abused sometimes by the parents and sometimes by close relations and domestics. So the age range is from under one year to about nine or ten years for the type of sexual abuse. ■

(Based on an interview)