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CHILDREN CAUGHT IN PROSTITUTION SPEAK OUT ***Government Called to Respond in New Report***

Children and young people abused through prostitution are demanding Government help to escape from a life of ruthless sexual exploitation, a new report reveals today. *'More Than One Chance'*, launched by leading children's charities, captures the experiences of children and young people involved in prostitution.

Based on face-to-face interviews with 41 people*, aged between 14-38 with experience of prostitution, the report reveals that statutory agencies, such as national health and education services, are failing to identify those vulnerable children and young people who are being sexually exploited in their communities.

Two youth researchers conducted interviews with the young people aged 16-25. According to the report, the controlling influence exerted by pimps is a major factor that prevents young people from leaving prostitution. Fear of violence from them also means that many remain in prostitution, even though they desperately want to leave. It also shows that running away from home and drug taking leads, in many cases, to a life of abuse through prostitution.

The report was developed by The Children's Society, NCH, NSPCC, Barnardo's, ECPAT UK, (End Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking) and funded by the Home Office.

Commenting on the report, Jacqui Smith, Health Minister says: "The messages from this research make clear that the Government and local agencies have more to do in order to effectively address the needs of this particularly vulnerable group of children. "It is essential that effective prevention, protection and reintegration strategies are in place to ensure good outcomes for children involved, or at risk of becoming involved, in prostitution."

The *'More Than One Chance'* report also found that:

- All of those interviewed had made more than one attempt to leave prostitution but felt there was not enough support to do so
- Those interviewed feared violence from pimps far more than the violence they might suffer after getting into a car with a stranger

- The average age of their first experience of prostitution was 16 (some of those interviewed had been involved in prostitution since the age of 11)
- 77 per cent of those interviewed had run away from home at least once and 83 per cent had taken, or were addicted to drugs, including heroin, crack and amphetamines before becoming involved in prostitution.
- 75 per cent of those interviewed had truanted from school
- Everyone interviewed had suffered various forms of physical or sexual abuse at home
- The majority of interviewees felt they had little choice or control over their lives

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Helen Veitch, ECPAT UK (End Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking) Campaign Coordinator, says: "The report highlights how invaluable the experiences of these children and young people are in understanding the problem of child prostitution in this country.

"They feel an overwhelming sense of isolation from services and have underlined the challenges they face when trying to escape sexual exploitation.

"It's vital that we learn from their experiences and ensure they are involved in highlighting the risks and realities of prostitution to other children at risk of sexual exploitation."

The children's charities are calling for:

- Children abused through prostitution to play a key role in developing prevention strategies with vulnerable young people. These would highlight the risks and realities of prostitution.
- Police and social services to develop joint strategies, alongside education and health departments and the voluntary sector, to provide a dedicated service for children who are at risk of sexual exploitation, e.g. those who have run away from home or are truanting from school.
- Creation of safe, supported housing for vulnerable young people at risk of prostitution
- Greater support from agencies, such as employment and education services, for children and young people wanting to leave prostitution. They often face multiple problems, such as drug addiction, financial insecurity and abusive partners or pimps, making long-term stability difficult.
- Enforcement of guidelines on the disruption, detection and prosecution of pimps and punters. In May 2000, the Department of Health produced guidelines to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and encourage the investigation and prosecution of offenders. Under the guidance, Area Child Protection Committees (ACPC) are required to set up local protocols that respond to children where there are concerns that they are involved in prostitution.

Background to Current Legal Framework Affecting Children and Prostitution

Prosecutions of adult who exploit children through prostitution are rare and, due to outdated laws – some as old as 100 years old – sentences have often been light. ‘Abusers’ or punters who have sexual intercourse with children aged between 13 and 16, for example, have only faced a maximum sentence of two years.

The Sexual Offences Review, unveiled in July 2000 by the Home Office, however, recognises the need for legislation to address child prostitution as a serious sexual offence.

It proposed specific offences relating to child prostitution, such as buying sex with a child, and creating a maximum 14-year penalty for pimps living off the earnings of children abused through prostitution.

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Following the review, the Government announced last month measures to protect children at risk of sexual exploitation. Proposals in the ‘Protecting the Public’ White Paper will create a new offence of the commercial sexual exploitation of a child under 18.

It will cover a range of activity including buying the services of a child, causing or encouraging children into sexual exploitation and controlling the activities of a child involved in prostitution or pornography.

* Interviews were conducted in the following areas: Doncaster, Middlesbrough, Wolverhampton, London, Rotherham, Northampton, Bradford, Leeds, Stoke and Southampton