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London Social Services Lack Sufficient Awareness of Child Trafficking or How to Deal With It

London social services know that child trafficking exists in London but are not always clear on the facts or how to tackle the issue, a new report says.

The report -- "Cause for Concern? London Social Services and Child Trafficking" -- launched today by ECPAT UK - shows that despite the fact that child trafficking is a growing problem in the UK, the majority of social workers in the region are not being given the information, training and resources to be able to help the children affected by it.

"Many of the social workers we interviewed for the report felt that they may have missed cases of trafficking through not being aware of this issue," said Carron Somerset, author of the report.

"Our research shows, among other things, that a clearer distinction needs to be made between children who have been smuggled and those that have been trafficked. These are entirely different issues requiring different approaches when it comes to helping the child."

A trafficked child is a child that has been taken away of their home environment for the purposes of exploitative labour (including fraud, prostitution, etc). A smuggled child is one brought into a country by someone who benefits financially by doing so but who does not exploit the child.

This distinction is not often made by social services and, whilst it is hard to draw a line between the two, the ECPAT UK report stresses the importance of carrying out the appropriate investigations to ensure that the right response is applied to each situation.

"The needs of a trafficked child are dramatically different from those of a smuggled child," stressed Carron Somerset. "It is the immediate responsibility of those who come into direct contact with such children to identify them at the earliest opportunity and for social services to provide them with the care they need."

"Child trafficking can only be dealt with effectively through a multi-agency approach incorporating the police, immigration and social services. While our research has focused mostly on social services in London, it is clear from our findings that there

are serious shortcomings in terms of the capacity of all three bodies to tackle this issue."

As the report shows, social workers are sometimes relying on immigration officials to identify trafficked children, immigration officials are not doing so (again, through lack of training and resources) and a number of social services have had poor responses from the police when they have raised concern about the safety of a trafficked child. The ECPAT UK report provides clear examples of the kind of physical and psychological damage suffered by trafficked children:

- Two Ugandan girls (14 and 15 years old) who had been used as prostitutes by soldiers were helped to flee by an agent. On arrival in the UK, he kept them captive and he and other men forced them to have sex with them until they managed to escape.
- A 16 year old Chinese boy collected by social services from a police station after he was caught stealing. He revealed that he had been living and working in a restaurant to pay back the debt he owed to his trafficker.
- A 13 year old Vietnamese girl brought into a brothel from where she managed to escape after breaking a window.

These cases are among a total of 35 uncovered by talking to social workers in 17 of the 33 London boroughs - a significant number considering that, as the ECPAT UK research shows, most social workers interviewed lacked the training and guidance that would enable them to know what trafficking is and, as a result, tended to confuse trafficked children with smuggled children. In addition to this, individual case loads are not discussed openly among social workers so members of the same team might not even be aware that their colleagues are also dealing with trafficking cases.

"This illustrates the difficulties involved in producing accurate figures for trafficked children," Carron Somerset added. "To find out all cases of child trafficking in London, a researcher would need to be able to speak to each and every individual social worker."

The report concludes that a major step forward would be for social workers to start to discuss the issue of child trafficking within teams, across teams and across boroughs. This would help raise awareness of the problem, ensure a more co-ordinated approach and assist in setting up systems that would help trafficked children.

"It is critical for social workers to be provided with the tools that will enable them to carry out their work in this area. Without guidance, practice manuals and safe accommodation for trafficked children, the protection of those children and the prevention of trafficking will continue to be an almost impossible task," Carron Somerset concluded.