



protecting children everywhere

Child Sex Tourism in Dominican Republic

1. Background

There are two types of child prostitution in the Dominican Republic. The more 'traditional' form prostitution that takes place in indoor establishments, such as brothels. The second is a new form of prostitution that includes both boys and girls, working independently away from indoor places, practised on an occasional basis and mainly in tourist areas. The new type of prostitution has resulted from the increase in tourism, particularly as tourists pay higher prices than local men. While the majority of the children work on their own, some may have someone who finds the 'customer' for them.

Although there is a recognised sex industry in the Dominican Republic, those involved are socially stigmatised and legally harassed. In the past the police regularly rounded up and arrested those involved in prostitution. Corruption within the military and police force was also recognised as widespread. Since 1998 police clampdowns on outdoor prostitution in Boca Chica and Sosua, have resulted in large numbers of women and girls being arrested and fined. A number of bars that had children working for them were closed down and their owners fined or deported. The result of the clampdown was a reduction in sex tourism in Boca Chica and Sosua, although not in the Dominican Republic as a whole, as sex tourists appeared to travel to other areas such as Cabarete.

Elections in 2001 saw the new Government determined to eradicate police corruption. Rather than the military police policing the tourist areas, high numbers of tourist police were employed. As well as increased police powers, the new tourist police were given higher salaries and have become less threatening and more tourist-orientated. However, policing towards prostitution offences remained largely the same, and while attitudes amongst police may be changing in relation to children being viewed as victims rather than 'prostitutes', there is still some way to go for women and children involved in prostitution to not be treated as criminals.

Dominican Republic Law

The age of consent is eighteen years of age. The Code of Minors has recently been revised and has strengthened provisions against child abuse, including physical and emotional mistreatment, sexual exploitation and child labour. The offences of child abuse carry a sentence of between twenty to thirty years and \$2,000 - \$10,000 fine. In the past, offenders arrested for sexual abuse against children have rarely been prosecuted, but are instead deported to their country of origin. Between 2000 –2001 two Spaniards, one Italian, one Canadian and one German were deported for sexually abusing boys or young girls. The police have also charged three local people involved in organising trafficking networks of children from poor provinces to tourist areas. The new law was ratified in 2003.

UK Law

British tourists who commit sexual offences against children in the Dominican Republic can also be prosecuted in the UK when they return home under the UK Sexual Offences Act, 2003. Additionally, the Sexual Offences (Conspiracy and Incitement) Act, 1996, allows for the prosecution of someone who conspires to commit a sexual offence outside the UK, or incite someone else to commit the offence. Therefore if one person either helps or pushes another to commit the offence, they too can be prosecuted in the UK.

2. Who are the children and aspects of vulnerability?

According to newspaper reports approximately 30,000 children and adolescents are involved in the sex industry. Two thirds of those are girls. The main reason for entering prostitution is to support themselves, their children or their family. It has also been found that girls enter prostitution with the aspiration of meeting a rich foreign man that takes them abroad.

Children become involved in prostitution through friends and family who encourage them to migrate and help them to find jobs and settle into tourist areas.

“Many minors, both boys and girls start to work in prostitution between the ages of thirteen – fourteen. Girls are considered sexually available by the time they are twelve – thirteen, while the boys tend to move from shoe shining into offering sexual services as a way of distancing themselves from shoe shining which is considered a childish profession”.

Boys often move into the top end of the market as ‘Sanky Pankies’¹, men aged eighteen to thirty who often work for hotels or have some other employment in the tourist sector and mostly provide sexual services for tourist women.

While one reason that children become involved in prostitution is to support the family, there are a number of other causes:

Weakening of family structure: The loss of the nuclear family and the family ‘safety net’ makes children vulnerable to exploitation, particularly in relation to girls. Single-female headed households, or households where the males of the family do not support the family, often results in the children needing to support the family. Girls often go into prostitution due to a lack of alternative forms of employment.

Sexual violence and intra-family violence: High levels of sexual and domestic violence leave children, particularly girls, vulnerable to sexual exploitation outside of the home. A ‘double standard’ for female sexuality exists within the Dominican Republic, with female virginity being prized, yet the men are urged to become sexual early on without taking on the responsibility. In some areas of the Dominican Republic, 25 percent of girls in prostitution had been raped. Low levels of sex esteem and confidence, coupled with the loss of virginity and exposure to violence leaves girls in particular, vulnerable to entering prostitution.

Patriarchal society: Dominican society is male orientated, with men running the household and having dominance over women. While some attitudes are changing and females are able to actively look for work rather than being kept in the home, there are few alternatives for earning money. Job opportunities still only exist in the ‘female’ domain of cleaning, cooking and clothing manufacturing. This leaves little opportunity for girls to earn money to support her family. Boys are often more able to find work outside of prostitution but may become involved when working in the informal tourist industry, where prostitution with tourists will earn them extra money.

Teenage pregnancy: Teenage pregnancy within the Dominican Republic is high with 13.3% of fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds becoming mothers and 403 babies born to girls under fifteen in 2003. With little opportunities to earn money, girls enter prostitution. UNICEF found that forty-eight to sixty percent of girls in prostitution had children, and the majority of these come from the poorer sector of society with ‘weak’ family structures.

Consumerism: The increasing pull of consumerism also leads to children becoming involved in prostitution. While they may become involved to support the family, there is also a ‘need’ to be able to provide everything the family may ‘want’. Children buy luxury goods as they feel they are priorities. It makes up for the physical

¹Also known as ‘Hanky Pankies’, ‘Sankie Pankies.

instability, weak family, lack of love and the difficulty in controlling impulses. Tourists want the 'prettiest/ sexiest' girl, and money helps the girl buy good clothes and make-up.

3. Who are the abusers?

The Dominican Republic attracts tourists looking for sex. They come from many different nationalities, backgrounds and with different sexual preferences. Of those who engage in sexual acts with children a small number are men who might be described as 'paedophiles' who have a specific sexual interest in children. The others are 'ordinary' opportunistic sex tourists, who travel in search of cheap, anonymous sex with multiple partners and will use teenage girls or boys if they are available. These men tend to stay in smaller hotels or private accommodation in tourist resorts with large expatriate communities such as Sousa, Boca Chica or Santo Domingo. There are members of the expatriate community who have been involved in organising child prostitution and recruiting children into tourist-related prostitution.

Many sex tourists use excuses to deny their own responsibility. Here are some excuses:

- *Women or children "are responsible for their own abuse"*
- *Dominican females are 'hypersexual' and more sexually permissive than Western culture. Sex is more 'natural' and 'acceptable'*
- *The harm from adult-child sexual contact has already been inflicted by someone else and they are not harming the child*
- *They need the money*

4. How is the tourism industry involved and what can it do?

The Dominican Republic received over two million visitors in 2000. European tourists accounted for 57 percent of visitors in 1998 with 30 percent from Canada and US (Ministry of Tourism Office, 1998). Tourism is one of the largest employment sectors in the Dominican Republic with an estimated 44,000 Dominicans employed directly in the formal hotel sector and approximately 110,00 indirectly employed in the tourism industry in 1995. However, they are often employed in low paid jobs, as higher paid jobs and roles go to those with a good education and/ or training and expatriates.

As well as working directly in the tourism industry, others are indirectly employed as taxi drivers, guides, souvenir sellers, craft vendors, food vendors, shoeshine boys and masseurs etc. Many of those working in the tourism sector have migrated to the tourism resorts to work and prostitution is another feature of the informal tourism sector, providing an income to those working directly as prostitutes, but also as intermediaries, such as taxi drivers, pimps and bar owners, etc.

Research has found that sex tourism and child sex tourism in particular is unlikely to be found in all-inclusive hotels. Due to tight security and pre-existing codes within the hotels, it is unusual for sex tourists to bring back prostitutes to their hotel rooms. However, the following factors are viewed as enabling tourists to sexually abuse local children:

Taxi drivers/ Motoconcho: taxi drivers facilitate child sex tourism. Some supplement their income by procuring girls as young as 12 or 13 years old for tourist men. On complexes such as Playa Dorada taxi drivers are often willing intermediaries, providing transport to local prostitutes, procuring girls and women and advising on short-stay hotels in exchange for a fee on top of the fare.

Discos: some discos in all-inclusive resorts allow entry to prostitutes, although these are usually over eighteen.

Male 'Sanky Pankie's': these men have direct access to the tourist discos and can move around the hotel complexes. Many work within the tourist industry and are able to procure girls for tourists, often seeing this as part of their job.

The same research found that rather than all-inclusive resorts, sex tourists tend to stay in smaller hotels in resorts with large expatriate communities such as Sosua, Boc Chica or Las Terneas. Some paedophiles and persistent sex tourists may stay in small hotels run by expatriates that are linked to a sex tourist network. Other research has found that some sex tourists stayed at all-inclusive hotels, but committed the abuse in short-stay hotels.