



protecting children everywhere

Child Sex Tourism in the Gambia

1. Background

UNICEF (2003) research shows that children abused through prostitution can be as young as ten years old in the Gambia, and that there is a demand for young children. In some cases older girls, aged over fifteen say that they are younger and virgins in order to attract customers. Research also found that some tourists convince themselves that a child is older than they really are to allay their guilt in having sex with them. Child sex tourism is particularly prevalent around the Tourist Development Area, as well as in Kololi, Senegambia and Pipeline.

Although there are some cases of children being pressurised into prostitution by their family, an intermediary is often absent and children work alone or in a small group. Sometimes an older 'brother' may set up the transaction, but may not be forcing the girl to prostitute herself. In other cases, a man may become known to tourists as a good 'intermediary' and be recommended to their friends. In this case, the 'intermediary' will be paid by both the tourist and the child to initiate contact.

Research by Terre des Hommes (2003) outlines the ways in which tourists find children for sex:

- *Hotel workers or security guards who take children to tourist's rooms for money;*
- *Bumsters who act as intermediaries between the tourist and the child;*
- *Taxi drivers who act as intermediaries for a fee;*
- *Young men who can be seen driving around the tourist area in four-wheel drives and appear to provide illegal services to tourists;*
- *Tourists meeting with children who are selling fruit or peanuts on the beach;*
- *Meeting with children on the street, or in touristy places;*
- *Making contact with a family and offering financial help for buying food and then offering school sponsorship to children;*
- *Going to schools and picking up children to offer sponsorship,*
- *Getting a child's mobile number and then offering them free educational materials and school sponsorship.*

Gambian Legislation

The Gambia ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child on 3rd August 1990, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child in September 2000, both of which require the government to protect children from sexual exploitation.

The main legislation is the Tourism Offences Act, 2003, which is wide-ranging and defines a child as anyone under eighteen, although the legal age of consent is sixteen years. The Tourism Act stipulates that anyone employed in the tourism industry is committing an offence if s/he makes any sexual advances or offers any illegal service or product to a tourist. Such an offence leads to a fine, imprisonment of a maximum of two years and disqualification from tourism related work for ten years. The Act also states that owners, occupiers and managers of property can face a fine and five years in prison if they knowingly allow a child to use their premises for the purposes of sexual activity.

Furthermore, under Article six of the Act, a tourist who sexually abuses a child commits an offence whether or not the child consented to the sexual abuse and whether or not at the time of the sexual abuse the tourist believed the child to be over eighteen years of age. On conviction the tourist could face imprisonment of up to fourteen years.

UK Legislation

While British tourists who commit sexual offences in Gambia can be prosecuted in that country, they can also be prosecuted in the UK for crimes committed while abroad. Under the UK Sexual Offences Act, 2003, article 72, persons can be prosecuted for a crime that is viewed as a criminal offence in both countries. Therefore if a tourist sexually abuses a child in the Gambia, they can be tried in the UK as both countries legislate against this offence. This Act is intended to cover crimes that may be committed by the traveller against either a travelling child companion or a child living in the country, but in which the crime is not detected until returning to the UK.

Additionally, the Sexual Offences (Conspiracy and Incitement) Act, 1996, allows for the prosecution of those who conspire 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?

The children being sexually exploited are from various backgrounds and the reasons for which they end up in prostitution depend on their individual circumstances. While Gambian children are abused through prostitution, other nationalities are also abused. Gambia has large communities of refugees from war torn neighbouring countries, and nationalities include Sierra Leonean, Senegalese, Congolese, Guinean, and Liberian. Many of these children may be living in the Gambia without their families, making them vulnerable to exploitation.

The main reasons that children in the Gambia become vulnerable to exploitation include:

Poverty: A 2004 report by the United Nations Development Programme states that 82.9 percent of the population lives on less than US\$2 a day.

Gender discrimination: Females are discriminated against, resulting in less access to education, employment or land resources. The effects of poverty fall heavily on women and girls, leaving them very vulnerable to various forms of exploitation. However, boys are also vulnerable due to their parents' situation, and children often work as vendors or apprentices to bring an income into the family and are often in situations that put them at risk.

Wealthy adults/ tourists: Poverty makes many families vulnerable to accepting promises of gifts and money by wealthy adults or tourists. While some tourists may make genuine offers, others donate in order to get close to the family's children. Families may be tempted to ignore the sexual abuse of their children by the 'donor' in order to meet their basic needs, while others may persuade or coerce their daughters to become 'friendly' with 'big men'. Additionally, families may be in denial about the source of extra income from their offspring, preferring to believe that they are working in a hotel, restaurant or bar.

Lack of family safety net: Children who are orphaned, live on the streets or are wards of a guardian etc. are more likely to end up in prostitution than a child who's family can provide for their basic needs and the stability they require.

Early marriage: Early marriage is common in the Gambia, and a significant age gap between an older husband and his young wife is considered culturally acceptable. While there are many problems associated with early marriage, the death of an older husband or divorce often leave the wife and her children without any means of financial support. This lack of financial resources can lead to young widows or divorcees being pushed into prostitution. Additionally, if a girl is not married early she is often viewed as a drain on her parents' resources and may feel pressured to contribute to the household.

‘Glamorous’ lifestyle: Girls also end up being sexually exploited because they associate prostitution with a ‘glamorous’ lifestyle. UNICEF (2003) found that some girls feel envious of their friends wearing fashionable clothes and hanging out in nightclubs. It is also considered fashionable to have a ‘white’ boyfriend because of opportunities to travel abroad. Thus, girls who are not forced into prostitution because of poverty or coercion become involved as a way to “escape victimisation of poverty, abandonment and sexual abuse or harassment at home where they feel powerless”.

3. Who are the abusers?

Both tourists and local men sexually abuse children. While this briefing looks specifically at tourists sexually exploiting children, it must be noted that there is also a demand for children by Gambians. According to UNICEF (2003) the existence of ‘sugar daddies’ (also locally called ‘Mafia Pas’ or ‘Big Bosses’), i.e. older men having sexual relationships with girls in return for basic needs and sometimes luxury gifts, is common in the Gambia. However, some of the women and children are looking for more ‘open’ prostitution in order to meet foreign men (*toubabs*) who pay more money, and potentially enable them to get a visa to travel to Europe. One proprietor of a large and popular tourist hotel believes that sixty to seventy percent of tourists visit the Gambia for ‘sun, relaxation and cheap sex’. Another proprietor notes that first time male visitors often find prostitutes around the Senegambia tourist area or Kairaba Avenue, but when they visit the next time they seek to establish longer-term relationships with prostitutes.

Furthermore, female tourists also visit the Gambia for sexual relationships, but often with adult males aged twenty-years and over. This trend is reportedly increasing and the relationships bear similarities to those of the male tourists, except that some lead to marriage. Older and relatively wealthier female tourists form sexual relationships with younger men who are eager to escape poverty and have a better life abroad.

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

Although a sex industry in the Gambia already exists and local men abuse children through different forms of prostitution, tourists add to the phenomenon. Some children are also sexually abused overseas when tourists take them abroad for a ‘holiday’. While the tourism industry is not directly to blame for child sex tourism, the industry makes it possible. If all the relevant agencies work together children can be protected from tourists seeking sex and abuse can be prevented.

2002 figures show that tourism contributes approximately 4.2 percent to the Gambia’s Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Approximately 10,000 local people are directly or indirectly employed in the tourist industry, predominantly in low earning or insecure jobs that last for the six-month tourist season. However, due to the wage earner often supporting an extended family, some five to ten times this number (and possibly ten percent of the population) may be totally dependent on tourism. With so many people dependent on the tourism industry, codes and practices are required to ensure that exploitation does not occur in this sphere.

In relation to child sex tourism, the Gambian Government is part of the Task Force to Protect Children from Sexual Exploitation in Tourism, a multi-agency group set up by the World Tourism Organisation. The group aims to “prevent, uncover, isolate and eradicate the exploitation of children in sex tourism”. Other measures in collaboration with non-governmental organisations include the development of a national plan of action and the establishment of a National Task Force on Child Sex Tourism.