



protecting children everywhere

Child Sex Tourism in Morocco

1. Background

Sex tourism involving young Moroccans in and around popular tourist destinations exists, but is difficult to uncover due to cultural taboos against the open discussion of sex. According to the National Monitoring Centre for Child Rights in Rabat, 43 percent of children making distress calls have reported sexual abuse by foreigners since the Centre began its monitoring from 1999 to 2003. Children exploited in the prostitution industry are also targets of sex tourists, especially those from the Gulf States and Western European countries. The village of El Hajeb, a town in the Middle Atlas near Meknes, is well known in its widespread abuse of children within the prostitution industry and attracts many child sex tourists each year. In addition, girls and boys working as domestic servants and street vendors are increasingly vulnerable to child sex tourism, particularly in the cities of Marrakech and Casablanca.

Morocco Legislation

Morocco ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) on 21 July 1993. Since then the government has amended and introduced legislation designed to eliminate and ameliorate the conditions for children facing all forms of abuse. The Penal Code was amended in December 2003 to make child sex tourism a criminal offence and in 2004 the penalties were increased for those guilty of promoting prostitution, child pornography, sex tourism and child sexual abuse. If an adult is found in a hotel room with an unrelated minor, the presumption will be that the child is there for sexual purposes. The Penal Code also sets out punishments for perpetrators of sexual abuse that are related to the child. The penalty for sexually abusing a child ranges from five to thirty years, depending on the age of the victim.

The Islamic Criminal Code punishes any sexual activity outside of marriage and where the girl is a minor the penalty can be higher than two years of imprisonment. This law exposes many young girls to re-victimization by the legal system when they are unable to prove their sexual abuse. Article 40 of the Penal Code provides that any person having knowledge of violence committed against a child must inform the public prosecutor.

UK Legislation

While British tourists who commit sexual offences in Morocco 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 tourists sexually abuse a child in Morocco, 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 most vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation, including sex tourism are those exposed to:

Poverty: Most of the rural population is extremely poor and many children try and assist their families by seeking out work in the cities. Others run away to escape their poverty.

Family breakdown: One reason for children running away from home and living on the streets is physical and sexual violence at home. Although more boys run away to a life on the streets, it is girls who report greater levels of sexual and physical violence in the home. Reports suggest that much of the problem stems from parent

Street children: Most of the children living on the streets are boys who are from broken families, although the numbers of girls are rising. The boys are mainly from rural areas who believe they can work in the cities and make money. However, the reality is the sexual and physical abuse of these children by adults and their peers. Most of them are forced to join clans or gangs for their protection at the price of systematic sexual abuse by the gang leaders. NGO's report that European sex tourists are known to seek out boys on the city streets to sexually exploit. Many of the street boys in Marrakech work as tourist guides, placing them in the reach of sex offenders. Known as 'false guides' they are often arrested, fined and imprisoned by the police, rather than being protected.

Research shows that girls on the streets are runaway child maids who go on to becoming child victims of rape or being recruited into the sex industry. There are hardly any convictions against perpetrators, while the girl is detained in the Bennani Centre in Casablanca and later incarcerated under the Islamic Penal Code that criminalises extra-marital sex including rape.

Child labour: According to a government survey, 2.5 million children aged under fifteen drop out of school, and more than half a million work. Many of these work in the fields in rural areas, but millions are being sent to the cities to work as domestic help in conditions of near slavery. There is reportedly widespread abuse of young girls who work as child maids (known as petites bonnes), particularly in the large cities of Casablanca, Marrakech, Rabat, Meknes, Tangier, Agadir and Fes. Many of these girls are below the age of ten and are often sent by their families from rural areas to work in the cities and send their earnings back home. Such children are especially vulnerable to sexual and physical abuse by their employers and others in the houses where they work because the employers have total control over the children. Although there is no evidence to support sex tourists abusing child maids, the potential for such abuse remains. Child abusers may also take advantage of the practice of child maids by employing their own when staying for a longer time in Morocco. Reports suggest that many former child maids can be found in the brothels of El Hajeb.

Trafficking: According to the US State Department trafficking report the internal trafficking of young girls for domestic service and boys for begging is a problem in Morocco. However, a lack of reliable figures makes it difficult to assess the extent of the problem.

Adoption: The lack of a legal system of adoption leaves many children at risk, especially girls who are the preferred choice by families. Adopted children cannot take the name of their parents and do not have any inheritance rights, and since Moroccan families consider this to be less important for girls they prefer to adopt them. However, there are increasing reports of abuse against such children and allegations that they are adopted to a life of domestic servitude. This practice also has the potential of being utilised by sex offenders to abuse children whom they could informally adopt.

3. Who are the abusers?

Moroccan men are responsible for most of the child sexual abuse in the country. However, foreigners sexually abusing children appear to be mainly from the Gulf States who seek out young girls in the

prostitution industry or Europeans from Western nations who appear to abuse boys. Concrete evidence of child sexual abuse by such tourists is not readily available, but reports are increasing¹.

Most of the sex tourists seek out children already being exploited within the prostitution industry. But, they are also known to approach street children, primarily boys but some girls as well. Boys are more likely to be abused in this way since they are the ones mainly living on the streets.

4. How is the travel industry involved?

Tourism, along with agriculture, comprises the main industry of Morocco. The government has been active in initiatives against the commercial sexual exploitation of children, such as being a party to the Stockholm Declaration and Agenda for Action (1996), hosting an Arab-African conference that led to the Rabat Declaration (2001) and adopting the Yokohama Congress final declaration (2001). However, there is still an absence of reliable studies and data by the government or other agencies, which is made difficult given the cultural context where sex is a taboo subject.

In practical terms the government has taken some measures to address the abuse of children. A hotline established in 2003 for children who are victims of abuse is now active. From January 2000 to September 2001, there were more than 200,000 calls reporting child abuse, with many of them from children themselves. There are some sixteen national Childhood Safety centres operated by the Ministry of Youth that host minors who have been charged with prostitution offences or runaways. Although the stated purpose is for rehabilitation, NGOs are concerned that these centres are mainly closed punitive institutions that do not promote children's rights. From these there is only one centre for girls (the Bennani centre). In addition, 'tourist police' are charged with protecting both tourists from vendors and also nationals, especially children, from foreign travellers. Other policies aimed at eliminating child exploitation include greater educational opportunities, particularly in rural areas and awareness raising programs within schools about the nature of child sex tourism and other forms of child abuse.

The government has for not provided funds directly to NGOs working on these issues, but has assisted them in other ways. The Ministry of Tourism has been urged to help address the problem of sex tourism and to suggest solutions to the problem of 'false guides'. However, there is little information on programs initiated by the Tourism authorities to deal with the issue in tangible terms.

¹ US State Department, Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, 2004.