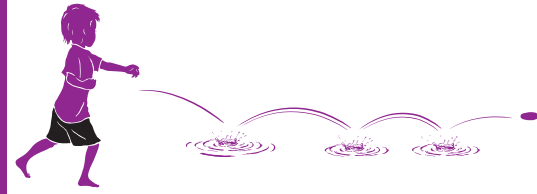




Discussion Paper



2009

The trafficking of children for sexual exploitation

Child trafficking is the movement of children for the purpose of exploitation or financial gain of others. ECPAT UK was the first organisation to undertake research that showed children are trafficked into, within and out of the UK for sexual exploitation. Whilst trafficking for sexual exploitation remains the most common form of child trafficking to the UK, children are also trafficked for other types of exploitation, including domestic servitude, forced labour, participation in criminal activities, benefit fraud, forced marriage and illegal adoption. Even children who are not trafficked for the explicit purposes of sexual exploitation are vulnerable to rape and sexual abuse as a form of control. Children trafficked for domestic servitude and forced labour can find themselves abandoned without money or identification and with nowhere to turn other than the streets, they are highly vulnerable to sexual abuse, including prostitution.

There are many different push factors and pull factors in human trafficking. These include violent and dysfunctional families, poverty, gender inequality, demand for cheap labour, political and economic instability, and dislocation because of natural disaster or war. However, most often it is the promise of a better future abroad that leads children and families into believing the offers of those who promise good education or employment opportunities abroad.

The UK Situation

Establishing the actual numbers of children trafficked into the UK is difficult because of the complex, hidden and illegal nature of trafficking. ECPAT UK has produced a number of research reports into child trafficking, interviewing practitioners from children's services, law enforcement and NGOs. From these small scale studies across the UK we can see that child trafficking is increasing and that children are now being trafficked to the UK from all over the globe.

In 2001, the ECPAT UK report 'What the Professionals Know: the trafficking of children into, and through, the UK for sexual purposes' found that West African girls, mainly from Nigeria, on entry to the UK were being taken into residential

care homes in the south-east of England. From these homes the girls had contact with their traffickers and soon after disappeared. Police investigation showed that the girls were taken to other European destinations, often to Italy, to be sexually exploited.

In 2004, the ECPAT UK report 'Cause for Concern? London Social Services and Child Trafficking' found that London Social Services were dealing with a substantial increase in numbers of children trafficked from Uganda, Congo, Ethiopia, Angola and Somalia, (mostly females) and Albania and Kosovo (mostly males). This change in nationalities was also mirrored by other social services outside London. Of particular concern was the trend towards the exploitation of African girls as young as 11 years in domestic servitude.

In 2007, the ECPAT UK report 'Missing Out: A Study of Child Trafficking in the North-West, North-East and West Midlands' found that almost 60% of children known or suspected to be trafficked had gone missing from care. Of the 56 missing children, none had been traced. Children from China, Nigeria and Vietnam figured most prominently.

In April 2009, the UK police led Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP), published a 'Strategic Threat Assessment on Child Trafficking in the UK.' This report identified 325 children in the UK as known or suspected of being trafficked in the year from March 2007 – February 2008. These children came from 52 countries including China, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Romania, Vietnam, South Africa, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Kenya and Ukraine. Many of the suspected or known cases of trafficked children in the UK do not come directly from their countries of origin, but come through transit countries within Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia.

In 2007 Operation Pentameter 2 was launched across the UK. It was a police led operation focussing on the trafficking of adult women for sexual exploitation in brothels and saunas. At the end of the six month operation police had rescued 164 females of which 13 were children from 10 different countries. Police agreed with us that this was just the tip of the iceberg.



Protecting Children Everywhere

In April 2009 the UK government set up a National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for the identification of trafficked people. Between 1 April and 30 June 2009 there were 40 children referred through this system, including two children less than 10 years of age. Children made up approximately 30% of all referrals of trafficked people in the first three months of the new NRM system.

Child trafficking is child abuse

Child trafficking is defined as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of a child for the purpose of exploitation” - UN Convention against Transnational Organized Crime

“A child is anyone under the age of 18 years” - UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

Traffickers actively instil fear in their victims as this enables them to have psychological control of the child. Methods used include physical and sexual violence as well as emotional abuse and neglect. Some children, especially girls brought to the UK for sexual exploitation, are likely to be brutally raped as part of an initiation rite, or made to watch other children being beaten or assaulted. Frequently children are kept isolated, not able to speak to anyone in their native language, and kept in appalling conditions, such as in a cupboard under the stairs or in a shed. Other children will be told that they can leave as soon as they have repaid their debt but the debt never diminishes. Passports and other identity documents are removed with threats that they will be in a great deal of trouble if they are found in this country without their identification. Children who have been trafficked are extremely vulnerable; they are in a foreign country where they may not speak the language and have no one to turn to for support and protection. They are unlikely to understand the welfare systems that exist in the UK and may be suspicious of anyone in authority. Corrupt police or border officials in their home country may have been part of the trafficking chain.

Both boys and girls are trafficked for sexual exploitation and case information shows that children can be sold between individuals and abused in private flats and houses, keeping them well hidden from the authorities.

Many of these children are forced into debt bondage, paying back money that has been used to bring them to the UK; the CEOP report found children were forced to repay money to their traffickers ranging from £5,000 to £40,000.

Travelling into and around the UK

Established ports like Dover, Heathrow and Gatwick are significant entry points to the UK but increasingly traffickers use diverse routes; smaller regional airports and lorry drops on motorways in less predictable locations. Airports are the most commonly used means of entry followed by seaports, and boys are more likely than girls to enter via clandestine methods including in the back of lorries.

Children who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation have been identified all over the UK, in both rural and urban areas, indicating that this is not just a problem for large cities. More research is needed to establish the link between child trafficking and the production and use of child abuse images (child pornography) now increasingly widespread across the UK. Internal trafficking is the trafficking of children within a country and this can include British children. Police operation Glover identified 33 children trafficked for sexual exploitation who were being moved from one location to another around the UK.

The people involved in trafficking

Traffickers can be organised crime networks or opportunistic individuals. They can be a total stranger or someone the child knows, such as a relative or a friend. In cases of sexual exploitation they can be networks of varying levels of criminality that ‘recruit’ children and women and supply them with false identification and travel documents and then make connections in different countries where they can make the most money. Most common is the ‘lover boy’ phenomenon where traffickers groom teenage girls and pose as boyfriends in order to convince the girls to leave their families for a better life abroad, only to sell them to total strangers in the UK.

Child trafficking is a child protection issue. It involves the exploitation and abuse of children which means it is the responsibility of everyone who comes into contact with children. The Government has emphasised that a child’s need for protection comes above and beyond their immigration status. The UK Government implemented the Council of Europe Convention Against Human Trafficking on 1st April 2009. Article 10 of the Convention establishes a number of key principles to ensure that children are given immediate care and protection. However, much more needs to be done to put this into practice. ECPAT UK is calling for a new system of safe accommodation and guardianship for trafficked children. You can find out about this and other calls to action by going to the Three Small Steps campaign section on the ECPAT UK website www.ecpat.org.uk.

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