

# Street Children and Prostitution as Survival

"When I am working, I try to think of other things, of my past life, when I was well, or I picture my daughter, and I can do nothing more but stare off into the distance. Before, my mind controlled my actions, and now, it is my body that I cannot recognize", Kesiah, Nigeria.

Kesiah's father was assassinated by a family member when she was only 15 years old. After her father's passing, her mother hired a transporter to take her to Ouagadougou, the capital of Burkina Faso, where she was to become a maid servant. But, that was not her true destiny. When she arrived in Ouagadougou, she was recruited by the prostitution cartel. After being raped countless times by her procurer, Kesiah was forced to begin selling herself. Beyond, the sexual violence she suffered, Kesiah was beaten regularly by her procurer, her clients, and even by the police with whom she came into contact with.

Kesiah's horrible story is one that is shared by numerous children around the world. During the Stockholm Congress, the first world congress regarding the fight against the exploitation of children, the topic of child prostitution emerged as an international problem, touching all continents of the world.

The International Labor Organization (ILO) defines prostitution as "the utilization of men, women, and children for sexual activities in exchange for payment in cash or other modes of exchange (gifts, food, clothes). Prostitution can take place on the street or in establishments such as brothels, clubs, massage parlors, bars, hotels, and restaurants." Child prostitution is part of the general notion of sexual exploitation and came about as a result of the joining of child pornography and the commercialization of buying and selling children.

According to the OIT, in 2006, there were 12.3 million people performing forced labor, 1.39 million were victims of commercialized sexual exploitation. Between 40 and 50 percent of these victims were women and children. Amongst these victims, children are considered the most vulnerable. UNESCO describes these exploited children as "boys and girls who have turned to the streets to be their homes; they must find their own way to survive; they are without protection. These children are often ripped from their families and from normal society." These are "street children" as opposed to "children in the street", who spend most of the day in the street but, at night, return to their families.

Unfortunately, child prostitution on the streets is very difficult to keep track of. However, one can estimate that the majority of children who spend their days on the streets are prostituted persons. Consequently, if they are without family connections, these children are forced to face life on the street and the everyday fight for their most basic need, to eat. Thus, these children turn to prostitution as a way of survival.

## **Causes That Force Street Children Into Prostitution**

Most street children turn to prostitution in order to survive. In order to understand the causes of child prostitution, it is necessary to identify the processes which drive these children to live on the streets. Children are supposed to be protected. This is to say that they should be in the care of their parents, or another responsible adult. But, there are a number of reasons that contribute to the separation of a child from their family. Most often, brutal and radical situations force them out onto the street.

### ***From the family circle to the street...***

Firstly, the child can lose his or her parents or guardian due to societal conflicts, wars, natural disasters, or epidemics like the plague in HIV/AIDS. As orphans, these children have no other choice but to live on the street. If the country in which these orphaned children are living is developed, the State takes charge of them. But, in less developed countries, social services offered by the State are either non-existent or very ineffective. In addition, the orphanages in these countries are often over-populated and do not have the resources to orphaned children need.

Another explanation was highlighted by Samu Social International in their brochure entitled, *Adolescents and Young Girls on the Street*. In this brochure, Samu Social International brings up the discussion of violence in the family. According to their observations, violence is a heavily prevalent cause for a child to leave their home: children leave their families as a form of rebellion. They have no other choice but to live in the street (*Samu Social International, 2013*). Samu Social's brochure gives the example of Nassou, a 10 year old girl from Bamako, Mali. During her first encounter with Samu Social Mali, she recalled that she was sent off to live with her maternal grand-mother after her parents got divorced. Since then, her mother has remarried. Nassou explained that she was always in constant conflict with her mother and that her mother always threatened to "stab her eyes out" or "break her arms" or "burn her legs." One day, her mother did just that. She poured petroleum gas on Nassou's legs and set them on fire. That was the last straw for Nassou. She left her home to live on the streets and that's when she met the Samu Social team.

Still, research articles consider child prostitution as being mostly caused by poverty. To a certain extent, many families are forced to abandon one of their children, usually their eldest son because they don't have the financial means to care for them. Another, more extreme and harrowing choice for parents is to use their children as scapegoats responsible for their financial problems. Some parents accuse their children of stealing or even performing witchcraft in order to force them to go out onto the streets to work. Antoinette, a 15 year old girl from the Democratic Republic of the Congo was kicked out of her home by her mother and forced to find work in a brothel at the age of 14. She told RNW Africa, "My mother suspected that I stole 100 dollars. I denied. There were 8 of us in the family, but she only questioned me. I was kicked out of my home. I never saw the 100 dollars, even with my own eyes!" (*Gouby, 2001*). Nonetheless, Claudine Legardinier demonstrates that if poverty is a cause of prostitution, economic advancement is not the solution. In fact, the growth of the middle-class has caused an increase in the demand for sexual services, forcing procurers to diversify their offers (*Legardinier, 2002*).

### *...and from the streets to prostitution*

On the street, children try to earn money to live on by doing small, manual labor jobs, or selling little objects -tea, newspapers... The streets are unfriendly and survival there is far from easy when the law is always against you. Prostitution is always a present option for making money and assuring that it can provide for their own basic needs. Occasionally, children migrate to neighboring countries, or even further to more developed societies, (notably Europe and North America) to find work. In most cases, this costs a fortune (hundreds, if not thousands of dollars). Children must have a lot of savings to be able to pay a smuggler or transporter.

If children turn to sexual relations as a way to survive, it is because their ideals about physicality have already been altered by the existence of sexual abuse in their past. Because of this, street children have somewhat of a split identity. Their bodies are "extremely aware" (over trained in begging, stealing, and prostituting themselves in order to survive), but their minds are completely unaware that their bodies are capable of doing them good and how it works. "While children and adolescents of the street are aware of what their body is capable of, they cannot properly get to know it" (*Samu Social International*, 2013). Thus the young boys are always looking to verify themselves through social delinquency, while the young girls turn to sexuality, in particular prostitution. Their bodies become nothing more than a means of survival.

On an even graver note, the body becomes mechanized. These children detach themselves from physical sensations, notably hunger and pain (physical and mental). They turn to alcohol and drugs (marijuana, heroine, and also easily obtainable industrial products such as paint thinners and shoe glue) as ways to numb themselves. The effects of these products affect the brain in such a way that they help to eliminate the sensations of hunger, coldness, and loneliness for brief moments so that they can endure the reality of being on the streets. Samu Social International has recorded many reports from the young girls of Mali. One girl, Mariam, disclosed, "There are always men in my vagina and in my anus. If I do not drug myself, I cannot handle the pain." Leïla adds, "Drugs help you to do things without reflecting, and they stop the suffering of your day" (*Samu Social International*, 2013). Jean Dabezies describes this vicious cycle of sex, drugs, and alcohol saying: prostitution becomes a way to make money "easily" so as to be able to pay for these products. Yet, so as to forget that they are sexual objects, and to make the instances of disdain go away, they turn to alcohol and drugs as their way-out. Prostitution is both a cause and an effect of these addictions (*Dabezies*, 1989).

Beyond the alteration of their bodies as factors for prostitution, the absence of protection drives the children and adolescents who live on the streets to "latch onto" a protector, usually this is the leader of their young group. This type of relationship allows the child to feel a sense of identity and belonging. However, this relationship does not come without a price. It is not uncommon for this type of leader to tyrannize his "protégés" and to force them into prostitution, either with him, or with other clients in order to make some money for themselves. Consequentially, the child finds "a despotic family", exactly like the one he or she has left (*Samu Social International*, 2013).

One more indirect cause that pushes children and adolescents into prostitution is the trivialization of sex and sex tourism. It's simple, without demand, there are no offers. Now that sex tourism has become a sweeping new idea, new ways of transport are developing and the amount of sex travelers is ever increasing. The World Tourism Industry says that 1% of all tourists are pedophiles looking for sex (*Dusch, 2002*).

In her chapter entitled "Sea, Sex, and Sun," Claudine Legardinier shows the vast multiplication of sexual destinations such as the Caribbean, Madagascar, Vietnam, Brazil, Costa Rica, Bali, Cambodia, Thailand, Burma, and also, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, all destinations reserved for homosexuals (*Legardinier, 2002*).

When young prostitutes' clients are mostly local, most sex tourists tend to come from rich countries. It is nevertheless important to reconsider an anchored, yet inconspicuous character. "Sex tourism does not only attract fat, white, lustful, old, western men" (*Dusch, 2002*).

For example, in Thailand, the majority of sex tourists are Chinese, Japanese, or Arab. These tourists justify their practices with two types of arguments. The first is economic. They argue that they are contributing to the development of a country by abusing these minors, affirming that, "it is better than letting them die of hunger" (*Bartoli, 2002*). This type of argument is constantly refuted by the International Labor Organization (ILO), which argues that the exploitation of minors is an illicit activity and that it cannot be considered a legitimate way of creating employment (*Sorensen, 2005*). The second type of justification is a problem of cultural relativism, like the claim that "children are more mature, and thus, more apt to have sexual relations at a young age," or cultural myths that claim, "sex with a virgin increases your manliness" (*Fondation Scelles, 2007*). Moreover, if a sex tourist abuses a child, he is doing this to assert a sense of domination as Malika Nor, an education specialist, explains: sexual abusers "feel not that much motivated by sexuality in itself, but rather, are motivated by the feeling of being strong and in control by having this type of relationship with a minor. To impose their sexuality is also to impose their power" (*Fondation Scelles, 2007*).

### **The Irreversible Physical and Psychological Consequences**

Prostitution leaves imprinted, irreversible traces on the body and minds of these children. These children suffer through all of the same problems in the whole world. For the most part these symptoms are the same for children who prostitute themselves in the framework of the commercial sexual exploitation of minors. Take Africa, Asia, Latin America, or Europe, all these children suffer the same consequences. Aurora Javate de Dios distinguishes between four categories of suffering caused by child prostitution (*Javate de Dios, 2005*).

Firstly, street children who prostitute themselves are particularly vulnerable to sexually transmitted infections (STIs). Their clients usually do not get tested for STIs and the children do not dare to demand that they use a condom. Many prostituted children contract HIV/AIDS and die very young. This situation worries UNICEF as this type of cycle only leads to the increase in transmission of HIV/AIDS. UNICEF estimated that more than 2 million people aged 10 to 19 were living throughout the world with HIV/AIDS in 2010. Most people amongst this group just ignored their HIV/AIDS status and thus, 2,600 people aged 15 to 24 are infected every day (*UNICEF, 2012*). Moreover, prostituted children are heavily affected

by injuries, such as wounds or rips in their vagina or anus because their tissues and membranes are extremely fragile. The young girls are forced to get abortions constantly, putting their lives in grave danger.

These street children are also in extreme physical danger being mal-nourished, having little to no medical care, and living in awfully dirty conditions. In addition, they are overexposed to violence, psychologically, physically, and sexually. This was highlighted by the United Nation's Council for Human Rights in January of 2012:

"The street can certainly offer refuge for those who suffer violence in their home or in their community, but it exposes children to other scenes and forms of violence, from the everyday psychological violence inflicted by stigmatization or intimidation, to the physical and/or sexual violence from other people who live on the street or from members of the public, to the access of violence within the gangs, to the violence of organizers of commercial forced sex and begging, to the violence of business-owners, police raids, rape and murder ignored by justice" (*United Nations*, 2012).

Prostituted children endure yet another danger, psychological suffering. Lack of sleep, troubled behavior (rage and aggressiveness), anxieties, phobias, and depression are just some of the daily struggles that mark the lives of these children (*Bartoli*, 2002). Prostitution truly destroys their lives, physically, sexually and emotionally. These children also tend to show an extreme lack of trust towards adults, and towards men in particular.

Overall, the social dangers here are innumerable. Used and shamed, these children exclude themselves from society. Their social marginalization is accentuated by the discrimination that society casts upon them. Sadly, these children lose all confidence and respect they once had for themselves. The real question is, without education, can one really leave the life of prostitution...

## **Legal Protections For Street Children Are At An All-Time Low**

In the introduction, it was indicated that information on street children is very hard to come by and that it is very difficult to obtain any sort of statistics on the number of children who are prostituted. The States are anxious to promote a positive approach to the question. They are often not in a position to tackle the issue. They haven't developed legislation and legal processes to protect these children who are particularly vulnerable. After all, these young prostituted persons are children. They should be a priority when it comes to having international protections such as "children's rights".

### ***The Congress of Stockholm, a turning point***

Before the Congress Stockholm in 1996, only articles 34 and 35 of the United Nations Convention included rights and protections for children (1989). Article 34 states that "The State parties get committed to protect the child from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual violence." Article 35 states that "These UN States must take all appropriate measures in their national planning, bilaterally and multilaterally, to prevent kidnapping and the selling and trading of children for any purpose or in any forms". In 1992, the United Nation's Commission for Human Rights adopted another action program regarding the trafficking of

children for prostitution and the production of pornography. Before 1996, the UN legislation was largely challenged by the issue of children's rights and protection.

The Stockholm Congress had a commendable amount of awareness regarding this issue. In this manner, the UN Convention on the rights of children proved itself stronger by adding yet another piece of protocol for the fight against the sexual exploitation of children. This set of rules was adopted by the General Assembly in 2000. The States ratified these measures and must put in place more concrete ones that included severe punishments for clients and procurers of prostituted children. At the European level, in November of 2001, the European Council and its 43 member States adopted 75 measures all with the intent of eradicating the trafficking of children for porn and prostitution.

### ***Awareness raising still far from bringing about lawful protections***

Despite the awareness raised by the Stockholm Congress, child prostitution still remains a huge issue with many difficulties. For one, the definition of what it means to be a child is not universal, so much so that even the common rule that a child is someone who is under the age of 18 poses a sizable limitation to the harmonization of national legislations. On the other hand, if certain States, like France in 1998, have adopted laws of extraterritoriality, authorizing the prosecution of immigrants accused of having sexually abused children abroad, the application of these laws is problematic in that it is difficult to identify and condemn sex tourists who can come and go as they please and because of corruption. The collection of proof is solely dependent on the collaboration with the local police, who are rarely cooperative (*Bartoli, 2002*).

### **Concrete Actions to Combat the Plague of Child Prostitution On the Streets**

In light of the dangers that prostituted children are confronted with, and the fact that they lack legislative protections, it is legitimate to ask this question: How do we fight against the plague of street prostitution? Concrete actions can and must be carried out in order to provide for the prevention of this problem, and to reintegrate and train the children and adolescents who are forever marked by the life of prostitution.

Citoyen des Rues International, a non-profit, non-denominational, and politically unbiased organization, was founded in 2007. Their work is present in 15 different countries in Latin America, Africa, and Asia. Their main objective is to aid street children in their progressive reintegration into mainstream society, and to accompany them through this process in their native country. To better accomplish this, Citoyen des Rues International has developed a new awareness project to prevent sex tourism in Morocco.

### ***Treating the problem before preventing it...***

Claudine Legardinier insists on the need of active solutions, on short, mid and long-terms. Firstly, there must be increased awareness and information as a way to combat child prostitution on the streets. Information campaigns about sex tourism focusing potential victims being trafficked for exploitation must also be directed towards the general public in order to show the horrid realities of prostitution: it is a way to tackle the issue. In addition, it is absolutely essential to train social actors, the police or the justice authorities, in order to

render them sensitive to prostitution and the fact that child prostitution is present and must be stopped. Finally, it is crucial to inform the media that their portrayal of children as delinquents who prostitute themselves voluntarily must cease. Education plays a massive role in the fight against male chauvinists who oppose the ideas of tolerance, respect, and equality; and also in discouraging sex seekers by showing them the realities of prostitution -violence, disregard for human dignity and rights. Above all, the educational institution offers children hope for a job and a brighter future. More long-term programs include combating poverty and inequality in the world, and making education and professional development a priority in order to prevent familial disintegration and other situations that push children into prostitution.

### ***...then reintegration and reformation of traumatized children***

Citoyen des Rues International has created 3 help centers in Peru, 2 in both Benin and Guinea, in order to reintegrate street children and to accompany them into their new lives. Unfortunately, the association foresees two main problems in their work. Sometimes, providing these children with clothes, food, and activities in the street can have a negative effect on them, encouraging them to remain passive or worse, to turn to life on the streets.

In order to help these children and adolescents to leave prostitution, social workers must first develop a confident relationship with the young people that they help by regularly roaming the streets where they work. In Lima, the NGO Children of Rio, a member of Citoyen des Rues International, hosts on a weekly event children who are invited to play soccer or card-games. Establishing a confident relationship is crucial, but difficult. Being socially excluded and stigmatized, these street children develop "avoidance strategies" towards the social and health structures of general society (*Samu Social International*, 2013). Once confidence is established between the child and the association, the accompaniment process can begin. This step consists of offering a shelter and lending a listening ear. The child must feel free to come and go, to and from the help center, and to speak freely to his or her social worker. Little by little, the social worker can grab a hold of how the child came to prostitution, and perhaps, how he or she can find an alternative solution. Once the child expresses the desire to re-establish a normal life, it is necessary to offer him or her a lasting, sustainable solution. This can be returning to their family (which does not occur very often, due to the fact that it is often family conflicts that push children onto the streets), or a long-term stay at the center. In addition, the child must be provided with a way to construct their future in developing literacy, or professional training. These kinds of decisions are made in a realistic manner after the child is well informed and has agreed. The goal of the education and professional training is to help the child to become independent.

Child prostitution can often be attributed to family disintegration, and can also be caused by other factors such as natural catastrophes, epidemics, interfamilial violence, and/or poverty. Once living on the street, these children must face one terrible necessity, survival. Pubescent maturation and change of relation to their body, the need to find security and identity, the tyranny of their "protectors", and the rise of sex tourism are some factors that push too often children into selling their bodies. The physical and psychological consequences are so very dramatic that they often mark their lives forever; very few among them recover. Their extreme vulnerability is all the more exploited because there are no international,

national, or regional protections. Although there are protective legislations for minors, street children who prostitute themselves still rest at the mercies of violence and serious abuse. Thus, the fight against the curse of prostitution has become gravely fundamental. Prevention, much like the reintegration and reformation of these traumatized children, allow to tackle both the origins and the consequences of the problem. So long as States choose not to face these types of unanswered questions, in spite of the wonderful work of numerous associations and NGOs, the fates of these children will remain void of hope.

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Citoyen des Rues International website: <http://www.citoyendesrues.org/>