

# **Input from Terre des Hommes Netherlands for the Special Rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children, Mama Fatima Singhateh**

*For the first thematic report to the Human Rights Council on the impact of  
COVID-19 pandemic on children*

## **Introduction**

The global COVID-19 crisis makes children especially vulnerable to sexual exploitation, especially in low and middle-income countries. Now that many sources of income are disappearing and the pressure on families to support themselves is increasing, they are more sensitive to the offers of traffickers who promise to help their child find work and shelter elsewhere. And precisely in the places where the travel and tourism industry, which is now completely shut down, is the main source of income, families and children with no other means of providing themselves with income may need to offer sex in exchange for primary necessities of life.

In Asia and Latin America, economies are most dependent on income from the travel and tourism industry. According to the *World Travel and Tourism Council* (read more [here](#)), the pandemic puts 75 million jobs directly at risk. In the Asia-Pacific there is an estimated loss of 49 million jobs in the travel and tourism sector, and in Latin America 10 million jobs in the same sector are at risk.

Activities in the travel and tourism industry are very limited due to COVID-19, but children are still vulnerable in this context to sexual exploitation. In places where the main source of income is now lost, power relations between abusers and exploiters and their victims and families under pressure will become even more uneven. This may be because they are 'groomed' online and a person travels after the crisis, but also by people who are currently abroad and who can contact children more easily and without supervision due to the crisis.

The travel and tourism industry is hit hard by this crisis. We (Terre des Hommes and [the Down to Zero alliance](#)) expect that it will be more difficult to generate attention for this topic from the private sector even after the pandemic ends; the sector will mainly work to get their companies up on their feet again. Travel may be made easier by governments, for example through less stringent visa requirements, to boost the sector. This can also lead to less strict monitoring of the sexual exploitation of children.

In addition to sexual exploitation in the travel and tourism industry, the abuse and exploitation of children outside tourist areas will also increase as children are extra vulnerable to being trafficked. Moreover, the children who are held in brothels in some of our

project countries are even more out of sight of the police and alliance partners due to the lockdown while hardly any rescue operations take place.

The closure of the schools and activities in the communities has made children more dependent on themselves and increases the vulnerability to domestic and (online) sexual violence for children and young people in all of our project countries. In some countries, we see that many children now spend more time online - and often less supervised. Some are bored and look for contact with strangers through apps, where they can be exposed to CSAM, or become victims of sexual abuse or exploitation online. In Thailand reports of Online Child Sexual Exploitation have doubled over the last few months (see country specific information below) and we have seen a sharp increase in live stream sexual abuse of children in the Philippines as a result of mass loss of jobs due to COVID-19 and families desperately seeking other forms of income.

At the moment, the crisis is also causing new ways and dynamics of child sexual exploitation, both online and offline, such as through newly established 'home delivery services'.

### ***Lack of attention for and insight into matters of sexual exploitation***

Another risk is that now that governments worldwide focus on physical health because of the pandemic, other and less visible child protection risks such as sexual exploitation and other forms of violence are receiving less attention. Governments and NGOs have less insight into the occurrence of sexual exploitation and it is more difficult to register this. All project countries indicate that this is an issue and that they expect that not all cases will be reported. In various countries it is already indicated that more requests for help are being received about domestic violence and sexual violence. In addition, various porn websites already registered a significant increase in the streaming of pornography in various (European) countries<sup>1</sup>. By combining the information from these various sources, we assume that the sexual exploitation of children will increase rather than decrease during this period. We are concerned children are being increasingly groomed online which may lead to an increase of sexual exploitation offline after the end of lockdown in different countries.

Although monitoring technologies exist to identify different forms of Online Child Sexual Exploitation (OCSE) in an early stage (such as web crawlers, forensic ICT and undercover technologies), these are not systematically and adequately deployed and implemented.

### **Government measures and 'civic space'**

Most governments in the Down to Zero countries have introduced a form of 'lockdown'. The implementation and duration of this differs per country. Some countries have also declared a state of emergency (Thailand, Philippines, Peru). There is a concern in the Philippines and Brazil, for example, that the government is abusing the situation in order to further limit the 'civic space'.

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<https://www.ad.nl/binnenland/door-coronavirus-kijken-nederlanders-meer-porno-dan-normaal-seks-is-nu-de-ultieme-afleiding~ada57b65/> and <https://www.nu.nl/tech/6038690/dutch-must-have-fun-at-home-porn-sites-very-popular.html>

## **Past experiences of crises**

Previous health crises such as Ebola in West Africa in 2014 and Zika in Latin America in 2015-2016 show that women and girls have experienced serious and long-lasting effects of gender inequality as a result of the crisis.<sup>2</sup> In addition to increased care duties for women and girls to care for children, patients and the elderly, it also took them much longer for their income levels to return to pre-crisis levels.

## **Impact COVID-19 on our programme activities**

Partner organizations have indicated that activities under all DtZ outcomes are experiencing delays and activities are being postponed to later in the year, where possible. It is also expected that the crisis will lead to the cancellation of certain activities. Below is a brief overview of the impact per country.

### **International**

The international program component in Down to Zero focuses on lobby and advocacy towards the (international) private sector in the travel and tourism industry and intergovernmental organizations at regional level (in Asia and Latin America) and international level (UN, but also for example the 'World Travel and Tourism Council'). The partners implementing this program (e.g. Ecpat International) have been working with these actors for many years to improve child protection in travel and tourism, a sector that has now itself become vulnerable due to the pandemic. It is the hardest hit sector so far and it is expected that the effects of this on our work will be felt for a long time. Private sector parties already indicate that they have difficulty in complying with the guidelines and contributions to 'The Code'. In the period March-May, six major events have been postponed, including the ITB (the largest tourism fair in the world) and the World Travel and Tourism Council Global Summit in Mexico. Where possible, we continue our work (such as research and the review of e-learning modules) online. A new component to the programme following the pandemic is the development of tools for the recovery phase of the travel and tourism sector after the pandemic.

### **Asia**

#### **Philippines**

Due to the lockdown it is not possible to carry out activities directly with children, such as training courses for children and youth groups. Children are more active on the internet and more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Children actively seek out strangers to chat, out of boredom, and there is a popular online challenge<sup>3</sup> where young people challenge each other to post nude photos on social media. The activity centers where children normally can go are now only open for very urgent matters. Previous studies in the Philippines have already shown that 70-80% of children who are victims of online sexual exploitation are exposed to it by their own parents. Terre des Hommes' field staff have noticed a sharp increase in online child sexual exploitation in the form of live streaming.

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<sup>2</sup> The Atlantic, The Coronavirus is Disaster for Feminism, March 2020

<sup>3</sup> <https://melmagazine.com/en-us/story/tiktok-invisible-videos-nudity-flashing>

Activities and planned events within the communities have been postponed until further notice. Communities are still able to find CSOs and ask for support as tourism as a source of income has completely disappeared. It is expected that even after the pandemic it will be more difficult to involve community leaders because all of their focus is on helping the communities.

Victim interviews are postponed by the judiciary and it is expected that even after the pandemic it can be more difficult to involve leaders and others within governments because they are busy fighting the virus and rebuilding (economic) structures.

The travel and tourism industry has come to a halt. However, activities are also continuing: the islands of Bohol and Siquijor seem to be less affected. In those areas, the Alliance continues to lobby the government to implement the 'Tourism Child Protection Ordinance', which requires companies to take child protection measures. It is expected that work can be resumed here faster than in other parts of the country, although it will be more difficult to involve the private sector even after the pandemic parties.

### **Thailand**

In Thailand, more or less strict forms of 'lockdown' have been announced in various areas. Schools and universities across the country are closed. The state of emergency also applies in Thailand and a curfew applies. During the Covid-19 lockdown (March to May 2020), the number of reports received by ThaiHotline involving Thai child victims has doubled. From an average of 800 cases per month to 1,600 cases per month. Most victims of cases reported to ThaiHotline are aged between 12 to 16 years old and a similar number of boys and girls are being abused.

Legal services, investigations into CSEC cases, family counseling, services to CSEC victims such as protection and medical and psychological support and referral to educational institutions and scheduled government meetings have been postponed. CSOs mitigate this by running an online campaign to disseminate information about online sexual exploitation. We are also working on an online training for the youth leaders with whom DtZ works. Finally, we look at training in smaller groups of children (maximum of ten per group), within the guidelines set by the government, in the regions where this is possible.

As additional mitigating measures, partners are now trying to develop online training on (online) sexual exploitation for teachers and community leaders / members. We are also working on child-friendly communication about COVID-19 and how to realize feedback / complaint mechanisms for children at health authorities.

Although many activities have come to a standstill, CSOs are trying to lobby the government for child protection measures to be taken, without discrimination and based on children's rights. Training of private sector parties has been postponed. Online training options are being looked at.

### **Indonesia**

In Indonesia, local lockdowns apply in major cities, including Jakarta. Cases of COVID-19 are also known in the areas of where our alliance is active. Partner organizations indicate that advocacy is becoming more difficult now that the government will probably pay less attention to messages in the field of CSEC because of the crisis.

Schools are closed and partner organisations in Indonesia also report that sexual exploitation is shifting to the internet because children are now at home and more on the internet. Loss of income is also seen as a major risk of sexual and domestic violence. Although training and workshops are being postponed, preparations for a number of media and law enforcement training are now being done online. Some outreach activities and counseling are done through long distance monitoring.

Other activities such as group meetings for children, training on CSEC, children's rights and transformative parenting are postponed. The national alliance 'End violence against children' is formulating messages to use in advocacy about the protection of children during the COVID-19 situation. Right now it is important that children know that sexual violence is not acceptable and that they can report it. As well as working with the government, work with the private sector in the travel and industry also focuses on what can still be done online. In addition, partners are now organising online training to train media to report sexual exploitation in line with children's rights (and non-stigmatizing).

## **India**

In India, the government has declared a national lockdown, which poses extremely difficult challenges for large groups of people. Especially children who live on the street, including undocumented children who have migrated or trafficked, currently have no opportunity to meet their basic needs and are at great risk of being trafficked and / or to be sexually exploited. Day-laborers in the big cities also have no income overnight and no more money to return to their families in the countryside. The government can contribute little to nothing to the loss of income and it is also difficult to keep a distance in overcrowded parts of large cities.

Partner organizations are working in collaboration with the local government to provide emergency relief to this vulnerable population. Families indicate that they are under pressure to give their children to human traffickers because they cannot meet their basic needs. The next three to six months are expected to focus on emergency relief and activities that directly contribute to the prevention of sexual exploitation, including human trafficking. The emergency relief activities also enable the partner to keep in touch with their target group.

The partners active in provision of care ensure that strict measures apply to prevent infection with the coronavirus. Visitors are not allowed and activities are postponed. Scheduled SEC awareness training and group meetings for children and youth, as well as counseling and home visits have been postponed. Meetings with government officials to advocate for greater attention in laws and regulations regarding sexual exploitation have been postponed.

The government lobby now focuses on providing adequate and inclusive child protection to children and young people who are vulnerable to sexual exploitation. Various activities have

been postponed. As for the private sector, ITB India and ITB Berlin (largest tourism fairs in the world) have been canceled.

## **Latin America**

### **Brazil**

In Brazil, a lot of unrest and chaos has arisen from conflicting advice and fears that the virus will cause large numbers of victims in the densely populated large cities. The risk is that the government will use investments intended for general social and public services to combat COVID-19. There is little confidence that local and national governments will be able to manage this crisis properly, which will mean that people outside the big cities and poor people will have little or no access to congested hospitals and health centers, resulting in large numbers of sick and dead as a result of COVID-19. In addition, there is great concern about the economic consequences, which will lead to even more migratory flows, in which girls and women in particular are at risk of sexual violence and exploitation. In addition to the aforementioned risks of (online) sexual exploitation and domestic and sexual violence at home, **partner organisations have identified new dynamics of sexual exploitation, whereby children can be delivered to the home to provide sexual services.**

We are looking at how the planned capacity building activities with different actors in the protection system can continue online with a focus on “protection and vulnerabilities” in COVID-19. In addition, we will look at how services can be delivered online, such as possibly 'therapeutic listening' for vulnerable young people and victims. Lobbying and advocacy to the government have been suspended. At a national level, partners seek to schedule online meetings to discuss strategies. The National Council for the Rights of Children and Adolescents, the most relevant body of the state where children's rights are discussed and in which our partners usually participate, seems to organise online sessions on how to protect children and young people during this pandemic. Activities related to the private sector have been suspended until further notice.

### **Colombia**

In Colombia a national lockdown has been announced, which poses major risks for certain indigenous people, among other groups, because they often do not have access to clean drinking water and other supplies to combat the virus. Migrant populations are also vulnerable because they work in the informal sector, lose their jobs and are not compensated by the government, which will increase poverty among specific groups. Migrants also have no access to health services. Lack of food and medicines leads to social unrest, and an increase in xenophobia towards migrants is also expected. All this leads to great vulnerability among children, young people and women to violence and sexual exploitation. Group activities in schools and communities have been postponed, contact with a number of youth leaders and community leaders continues via the internet. It is being investigated whether awareness-raising activities and the training of various actors in the tourist and travel industry can still be carried out via the internet.

## **Peru**

In Peru, a national lockdown and curfew have been instituted. This is enforced by police and military personnel, more than 20,000 people have already been arrested who did not comply with the measures. Schools are closed. In the Down to Zero intervention area Loreto, 90% of the population is working in the informal sector and the population is hard hit by job loss due to the crisis. It is not possible to travel to the implementation region in central Peru under the COVID-19 measures. In Peru, too, people are very concerned about the increased vulnerability of children and young people because they no longer go to school and they and their parents lose income and are more often exposed to sexual violence and exploitation.

The local partner organisation is currently working on planning, logistics and custom program activities to tackle implementation as quickly as possible when the COVID-19 measures are no longer required. Some training programs may be able to be modified by taking advantage of online opportunities when the COVID-19 measures remain in place longer. Other activities, including those in the tourism industry, are postponed because none of the organizations are active.

## **Bolivia**

In Bolivia there is a national lockdown, measures are enforced by police and military personnel, and the borders are closed. The Oxford Economics has indicated that Bolivia, along with Peru and Colombia, is one of the most vulnerable countries because healthcare will not be able to match the potentially large numbers of victims of COVID-19.

People in rural areas are still deprived of information about the virus because they live in isolation. They are hit hard economically because they can no longer sell their products to the townspeople.

In Bolivia, it is also expected that children and young people will be hit harder by the measures and will become more often victims of sexual and domestic violence and exploitation. The partner organization tries to maintain contacts via the internet and telephone. Activities with children, within communities and with organizations in the tourist and travel sector are delayed and will not be resumed until after the lockdown.

## **Dominican Republic**

In the Dominican Republic, the government has given everyone instructions to stay at home and a curfew has been instituted. The activities have been postponed but people are in contact with peer educators and community leaders via 'whatsapp' groups to keep up to date with the situation and to raise awareness about COVID-19. Information is also distributed, digitally and door-to-door, about sexual exploitation.

Community partners and contacts indicate that there are already signs that there are more cases of sexual violence and exploitation. Partners are in contact with the regional education agency to access an online platform to share information about sexual and domestic violence and the need to protect children against it in the context of the current crisis. Partners are in contact with, for example, groups of parents via social networks to discuss protection against COVID-19. Although 'advocacy' activities have been postponed for the

foreseeable future, technology is currently being considered to promote and create virtual spaces, such as the 'reporting network', where possible. This is a virtual space where the main institutions of the local protection system and representatives of the community and local authorities control and reinforce the "reporting route" and reported cases. This virtual group works with an ethical protocol, which guarantees the confidentiality and the type of the shared information.

Activities with hotels and other actors in the tourist and travel industry have been postponed as most establishments are closed.

### **Nicaragua**

The government of Nicaragua did not declare measures against COVID-19 at the time this information was reinforced (last week March 2020). The Scientific Committee has warned against possible negative consequences if measures are not taken. Many parents keep their children away from school at home. In general, there is little awareness of the severity of the pandemic.

The people in the DtZ intervention areas are vulnerable because they have a low income and no access to clean drinking water and hygiene products. All activities will be postponed for the coming months. Partner organization keeps up to date with a network of young leaders via telephone and where possible via the internet.

Activities such as training on sexual exploitation prevention cannot be performed. Residential care facilities can offer little or no psychosocial care for children and have to do with increased costs and / or lack of basic facilities. Staff and children in these facilities are at high risk of contracting COVID-19 if strict hygiene and distance measures are not taken. Because children cannot go to school, they are dependent on the home situation, where they often experience more domestic and sexual violence.

Partner organizations point out that children become more active on the Internet at home, and that they run a greater risk of sexual exploitation because offenders also go online. In addition, a large number of girls are at risk of not returning to school, which reduces their job prospects and increases the risk of teenage pregnancy.

### **Additional links and other resources:**

- School closure leading to an increase on FGM: [Kenya: Coronavirus Threatens Kenya Goal to End Female Genital Mutilation By 2022](#)
- Impact on victims of sex trafficking: [How Coronavirus Impacts Victims of Sex Trafficking– And What We Can Do](#)

**What essential protection measures, , including identification, reporting, referral and investigation, have been put in place to detect and prevent child sexual abuse and exploitation cases and how effective have they been since the outbreak?**



- Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI) in Kenya, on monitoring digital threats to children: [https://twitter.com/dci\\_kenya/status/1257327420388098051?s=21](https://twitter.com/dci_kenya/status/1257327420388098051?s=21)

**Have there been any initiatives on collecting disaggregated data on specific forms and manifestations of sale and sexual exploitation of children during the pandemic and assessing the near and long-term impacts of COVID-19?**

- Europol reports increase in CSAM:  
[https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52067507?ocid=wsnews.chat-apps.in-app-msg.whatsapp.trial.link1\\_.auin](https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52067507?ocid=wsnews.chat-apps.in-app-msg.whatsapp.trial.link1_.auin)
- [Protection of vulnerable children during Covid-19 pandemic – Kenya News Agency](#)

**Please, share information about challenges faced in the provision of uninterrupted healthcare, education and legal aid, as well as care recovery and reintegration services for the victims in the context of the outbreak.**

- [Why coronavirus has placed millions more girls at risk of FGM](#)
- [Over 4,000 school-going teens impregnated in Machakos during COVID-19](#)