



Call for input to the report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls to the Human Rights Council on prostitution and violence against women and girls.

Submitted by - Terre des Hommes Netherlands on 31.01.2024

Introduction

Terre des Hommes Netherlands (TdH NL) and grassroots partner organisations work on violence against girls and young women (GYW) in relation to commercial sexual exploitation ('Prostitution' as mentioned in the OCHR Call for inputs). The inputs presented here respond to Question 15, providing recommendations based on successfully implemented, innovative programs in East African Countries (mainly Kenya, Ethiopia, and Uganda). These programs address the intersectional vulnerability of GYW and facilitate the recovery of girls and survivors who have been sexually exploited for commercial gains.

The recommendations are based on three projects¹ featured in case studies: Building a Future Project (BAF, Kenya), Hope Project, Reducing Sexual Exploitation of Girls in Bahir Dar, and She Leads Project (SL, in Uganda, Ethiopia, Kenya). TdH NL focuses on vulnerability, exploitation, and catalysing systemic change, working towards creating a world free from the sexual exploitation of children.

Key Recommendations

A. International instruments and States need to use the right terminology to avoid stigmatisation

TdH NL noted that the Call refers in several instances to the terms "prostituted girls," "prostitution of girls," and "girls who have been prostituted." According to the *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse*², the use of such terms may imply that such a phenomenon represents a legitimate form of sex work or that the child has given her/his/their informed consent to 'prostitute' her/himself/themselves or opens up an assumption of responsibility of the child in her/his/their exploitation as well as potential shift of the blame onto the child.

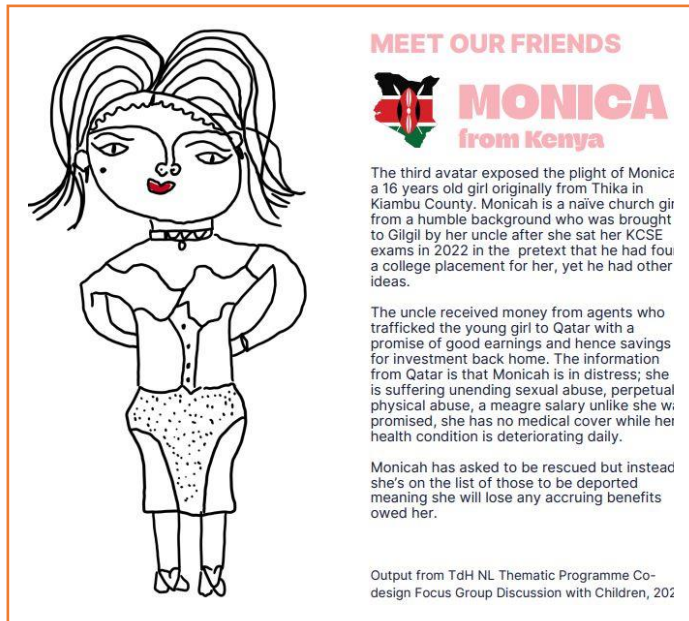
To avoid potential harm or stigma caused to children, TdH NL strongly recommends using the term "sexual exploitation of children (SEC)" and avoiding any reference to the word "prostitution." Our submission henceforth also has used the term 'sexual exploitation (SE)' only.

¹ Detail reports are attached as annexures

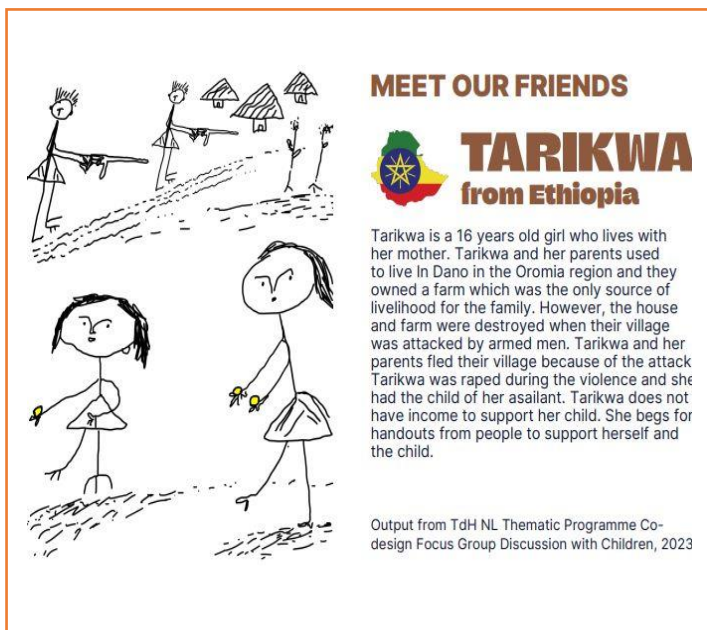
² Interagency Working Group on Sexual Exploitation of Children, *Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse* (2016). Accessible at: <https://ecpat.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Terminology-guidelines-396922-EN-1.pdf>

B. States need to focus on prevention strategies to address the root causes of intersectional vulnerabilities of girls and women

Many GYW are trapped in the cycle of SE due to poverty, lack of education/employment opportunities, negative gender norms, and social stigma/exclusion based on intersectional marginalisation. The lack of agency further compounds vulnerability to violence and polyvictimisation. Tackling poverty, promoting equitable education and economic opportunities for GYW, and challenging gender inequality and power dynamics through community-level awareness, State-sponsored policies, and legislative frameworks are crucial steps in preventing SE.



- The Hope Project evaluation reveals the average age of respondent children who had experienced SE was 14 years, with some as young as 6 years old. Approximately 61% of respondents were rural-urban migrants. Their migration factors are largely (60%) associated with family breakdown and pressure. Only 24% of the respondents' biological parents were alive. Educationally, 31% of them were either not enrolled in school at all or had dropped out, and 69% had attended some school education. The vast majority (98%) of the respondents were girls. 97% were from female-headed households. Income from SE was the main source of income for about 24% of the respondent families.
- The BAF Project evaluation mentions that 70% of respondents dropped out before completing secondary school. Across the sample, there was a 25% chance that a household fell below Kenya's National Poverty Line (NPL), compared to the NPL rate of 36%.



We recommend that State prevention strategies must focus on intersectional vulnerabilities and make socio-economic and welfare provisions for vulnerable GYW who are out-of-school, orphans, in the care of single parents (women), migrants, estranged/detached families, living below the poverty line and are in young and adolescent age. The intersectionality vulnerability is also depicted in the Avatars (boxed) created during co-creation workshops of TdH NL (2023) with children and practitioners.

C. States, through policies, need to address vulnerabilities of young mothers (victimised by SE) and make specific provisions for the children of victims and survivors of sexual exploitation to break the cycle of exploitation

Children who grow up exposed to SE of their mothers are more at risk. Addressing the vulnerabilities of GYW survivors with children will break the vicious cycle and prevent their children from being pushed into SE. People will also stop considering the children of the GYW SE survivors as their replacements. This further perpetuates the cycle, so addressing them would be an effective response and preventive approach. The country's laws must consider the needs of GYW survivors and address the gaps. Like in Kenya, the legal provisions are only for the female survivors of SE under 15 years of age.

- In the Hope project, none of the reintegrated target groups had their families or were living with their intimate partners. However, 33 percent have children (1-3 on average). Therefore, single mothers (SE survivors) are the caregivers; they provide for their children and share the double burden. The provisions in state policies will ensure the fulfilment of survival rights/ basic needs of the SE victims/survivors and their children so that they can make safe choices and cope with crises and shocks.

Case Study 1 – Project Hope: Reducing Sexual Exploitation of Girls in Bahir Dar in Ethiopia

Program goal: The program focus is to support girls at risk of/victims to sexual exploitation, create awareness and empower families and communities on CSE, support local government sectoral offices and police to implement plans and policies, Establish CSOs network and engage private sector actors to respond to the needs of commercial sex work violence victims

Key outcomes:

- 150 sexually exploited girls for commercial gain were identified, withdrawn, trained, economically empowered, and reintegrated into their community.
- Behavioral changes and promising economic activities were observed in the reintegrated girls.
- About 1000 vulnerable 'at risk' children received educational material support.
- 100 vulnerable households were provided with various types of training and business startup capital.

D. States need to promote and support awareness generation for behaviour change to shift societal attitudes and positive deviance models

TdH NL projects created safe spaces at the community level and worked with community champions/leaders. This promoted community engagement in actively identifying the children victimised by SE victims, and helped them to reintegrate and start a new life. In addition to supporting vulnerable community groups, the projects also raised awareness about the harms/risks and consequences of SE. They challenged the demand for exploitative paid sex, which decreased the demand and created a safe environment for GYW. Those who wanted to leave the sex trade (role model) were supported with alternative business opportunities and vocational training.

We recommend that the State make provisions for awareness generation for behaviour change and support role models.

E. States need to take a trauma-informed, victim/survivor-centric approach while formulating policies and legislation to address the issues of SE of children

The trauma of violence can have lasting psychological consequences, including post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, anxiety, and substance abuse. Rehabilitation of the most vulnerable target groups requires time, professional counseling, strong referral services, and psychosocial support before economic reintegration works.

- The best example is the safe-home (temporary home established in the Hope project) psychosocial service for the survivors that is implemented in TdH NL projects. TdH NL program evaluation found that community knowledge and service providers' knowledge about the negative effects CSEC has on the mental health of victims improves their approach and attitude towards victims and survivors of CSEC. This awareness also helps community members see CSEC victims/survivors as children needing care and protection rather than criminals. In TdH NL projects, while recognition of the negative psycho-social

effects CSEC has on victims has improved since baseline, community members started believing that CSEC victims are free to enter or exit the sex trade.

F. Promote private sector engagement to advocate for better work policies and safeguarding of children

Private sector engagement, especially small and informal restaurants and hotels, is needed to ensure safe workplaces for migrants to reduce or stop SE of GYW. Large-scale hotels have bylaws and policies to protect their workers from abuse and exploitation, though with a lesser focus on safeguarding children. Smaller entities lack such frameworks. State, private sector and civil society organisations must engage with informal and small hotels, restaurants, and bars, which are often the places of untrained and unprofessional hotel workers, employ vulnerable GYW for SE. Due diligence and protection mechanisms should be strengthened.

G. States need to make budgetary provisions, and the policies must address the livelihood challenges of the SE survivors and vulnerable groups by supporting alternative livelihood options and microfinance

The vulnerable group, victims, and survivors of SE must have workplace provisions, credit linkage with microfinance institutions, and provision of additional technical and financial support for those who are not successful in their income-generating activities. TdH NL projects supported the business startups and provided capital for income-generating activity. Also trained them on developing business plans and resilience building around economic shocks.

H. States need to improve knowledge of reporting channels like hotlines, and community-based reporting mechanisms other than traditional authorities

In the BAF Project, 90% of respondents reported they were willing to report SE cases. Yet, fear of retaliation and low trust in authorities remained the major hurdles in reporting the cases. Some deeply ingrained community-level attitudes remained entrenched. Hence, providing alternative reporting channels and improving knowledge of reporting channels other than traditional authorities and the police would be helpful. One option for overcoming these barriers is to provide or promote the widespread use of Childline, or toll-free numbers.

Case Study 2 - The Building a Future Project (Kenya)

Program goal: The Building a Future Project was a community-based prevention intervention designed to shift community knowledge, attitudes, and practices (KAP) in relation to the sexual exploitation of children. The project was implemented in two high-prevalence counties (Kwale and Kilifi) between 2020 and 2022.

Key outcomes:

- With the support of the Child Protection Committees, 130 children were identified as being either victims of CSEC or especially at risk
- Overall, 157 cases were reported through the referral mechanism during the project period. At the school level, 14 cases of sexual exploitation of children and 42 other cases related to child abuse or neglect were reported to authorities
- The estimated prevalence of CSEC within sampled households dropped from 4.4% to 1%
- Families were more familiar with the term CSEC, more likely to watch for signs of CSEC, know about the legal consequences of CSEC, and believe local perpetrators should be arrested

I. States need to increase and invest in interactive platforms for the sustained influence of girls and young women on decision-making and the transformation of gender norms in formal and informal institutions to address power imbalances and promote strategies to prevent sexual exploitation

SE inherently involves a power imbalance between the buyer and the seller of sex, making GYW more vulnerable to exploitation and violence. Negative gender norms and the lack of agency of girls make them commodities (often sexual commodities) with zero negotiation and decision-making power.

- The She Leads project in East African countries has made substantial progress in transforming social gender norms, focusing on accepting positive norms that support the participation of GYW in decision-making. Such engagement of GYW at different leadership levels helps prepare a conducive environment, and role modelling that has effectively challenged harmful norms and promoted girls' participation in decision-making.

Case Study 3 - She Leads: Girl & Young Women led advocacy (Kenya, Ethiopia, Uganda)

Program goal: The project encourages a girl and young women-centered advocacy approach. It empowers them to capture and influence leadership spaces to challenge negative gender norms or issues they identify. It, therefore, builds the capacity of girls and young women to identify issues and design strategies to advocate for the change they want to see.

Key outcomes:

- Improved participation in decision-making platform
- Girls and Young women have increasingly been challenging negative gender norms and inequalities and speaking up about issues they are facing, including sensitive issues like child marriages, sexual harassment, and violence
- Girls have also developed collaborative relationships with community members.
- Girls and Young women have been involved in reviewing and suggesting gender-friendly and progressive policies and legislations at the local and National level

- GYW in SL project has been advocating for the prevention of SE. Uganda Outcome Harvesting Report 2022 reflects on some key advocacy work contributing to preventing SE. For example, GYW reported that nude 'street dances' paid GYW a small amount, then left them vulnerable to SE and teenage pregnancy. GYW advocates, along with the local government leaders, together introduced by-laws that protect the rights of GYW from abuse and violence. GYW advocacy also led to the announcement of a resolution to regulate the operation of local nude 'street dances' and lodges.

We recommend using the Gender and Intersectionality lens to understand and address the concerns and priorities of GYW, to enable and enhance their participation in accountability processes and mechanisms that curb the exclusion and marginalization making them vulnerable to SE.

J. Conducive and respectful environment for girls and women through State policies for media regulation

Many times, the social normalisation of negative gender norms, sexualisation of girls and women can contribute to a culture of tolerance for violence against GYW. The generalised use of social media has aggravated and multiplied the risks of SE in the past decade, in the context of poor digital literacy and lack of regulation of the online environment amongst GYW. Media, being a socialising agent, plays a critical role in the social construction of gender. Media portrayals of women and men play a role in conveying how masculinity and femininity should be perceived and performed, defining gender roles and responsibilities, and showcasing how men and women should relate to and with one another.

- SL Project questioned the role of media and analysed how GYW are routinely subjects of objectification on media platforms in both traditional and digital media. They mostly appear where news is "sexualised".

We recommend that State policies and guidelines regulate media to create a gender-friendly and safe environment as a preventive measure to stop SE.