

Saint Lucia Report to the Regional Congress

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The Ministry of Health, Human Services, Family Affairs and Gender Relations of Saint Lucia is the key institution represented in this consultation to discuss Sexual Exploitation of children along with another partner in the social programming for children, the Ministry of Education.

Within the Ministry of Health, Human Services and Family Affairs and Gender Relations, The Division of Human Services and Family Affairs is the agency with responsibility for the coordination and delivery of preventive and protective services to families and children. These interventions are provided within a framework of achieving family preservation and offering maximum family supports to the clients. This Division also serves to address the issues which contribute to dysfunctional family relationships, poor parenting and offers assistance to families experiencing temporary economic hardship. Social and welfare services are also extended to the disabled, homeless and elderly among the vulnerable social groups.

Sexual Exploitation of children is a growing phenomenon that has been assuming some gradual recognition as a serious social problem impacting upon our Saint Lucian children, families and the society. However, the extent to which this problem remains largely under-documented, under-researched, and the activity generally invisible, the strategies employed to prevent and to combat the problem remain timid in their approaches and the efforts beyond public education, are still largely uncoordinated.

One of the elements which impacts upon the process of executing a well coordinated program in this area of sexual exploitation is the absence of inter agency protocols to provide

protection and ensure comprehensive and seamless coverage of services to the child who is impacted. Similarly, an inadequate data collection methodology contributes to the difficulty in assessing the exact dimensions of the phenomenon of sexual exploitation of children. Throughout the various institutions and services which manage aspects of this problem, there is a tendency towards not desegregating the data of the specific cases but rather to lump the information under the almost generic headings of sexual abuse, child behavioral problems, and sexual offences. Specific categories which capture information on the incidence of child prostitution, child pornography or a profile of the "consumers" are seldom if at all used in case recordings, and this system of documentation and data collection therefore makes it difficult to bring a profile and any visibility to the exact dimensions of the problem.

Consequently, empirical evidence-based justification for programming and data which can be utilized to frame national policy development in this area is frequently weak, and programmatic proposals for implementation are supported only by the limited generalized data that is available on reported cases of sexual abuse. Even where the data is available, it is sometimes discounted as unreliable in contextualizing the scope of the problem since there is no conclusive evidence that all of the cases that come to the attention of the health professionals, schools, public authorities, and non-governmental organizations are being reported. The rate of under-reporting has been estimated by the Division of Human Services and Family Affairs to be as low as one case in every three incidences of abuse, and as high as one case for every ten that occur.

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The institutional response to sexual exploitation of Children in Saint Lucia has over time been evolving into a planned preventive and protective program. However, it should be noted that the impact of these current programs could be more extensive if the occasional inconsistencies and problematic areas of cooperation and coordination between service sectors were resolved.

Whereas the Government of Saint Lucia has not developed a specific National Agenda for Action, the five pronged approach to the eradication of sexual exploitation of children has been adopted in practice, and efforts are maintained towards promoting an increased awareness of the problem of sexual abuse, and in urging the state in partnership with families to assume responsibility for the protection of all children. Policy measures to afford some reduction in the circumstances that increases the vulnerability of children to sexual abuse are also being proposed, considered and implemented. For families and children where poverty predisposes the children to sexual exploitation and the attendant problems, educational interventions are being targeted, and assistance is offered through the provision of social services which includes financial aid to alleviate the impact of the poverty, educational assistance, and the extending of income generating opportunities to the family with specific emphasis upon training.

In the area of enhanced protection of children, foster care programming, and a place of safety for girls at risk are a few of the protective interventions which are being incorporated in to the programming to reduce the risk factors.

Increasingly, social development studies that seek to assess poverty in Saint Lucia and to identify causal factors have begun to include issues on child vulnerability in their assessments. This trend towards inclusion of children at risk has afforded some increased visibility on the issue of sexual exploitation and family violence and the subsequent conse-

quences for children. These studies provide some additional avenues through which political decision makers and other professionals operating in allied service areas outside of child welfare services may be sensitized to the serious issues impacting upon our children and the implications for future social costs. These studies by providing some documentation on sexual exploitation of children and adolescents have also served as enabling tools to field practitioners in their challenging task of advice for an increased allocation of resources to address such problems that are impacting upon our children and families.

Saint Lucia is a member of the Organization of the Eastern Caribbean States. During 2000, the Supreme Court of Appeal of the Organization of the Eastern Caribbean States(OECS)in collaboration with United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) Caribbean Area Office, and National Children's Home (NCH-Action for Children) embarked upon a legal reform process with the goal of revising domestic violence and family legislation within the context of the Convention of the Rights of the Child and other International Treaties for Human Rights. This regional project initiated one year ago, has been extended within the Caribbean region to include the British Overseas Dependency Territories, and is being executed at both local and regional levels. The project anticipates an outcome of harmonized family rules and laws, an improved judicial process for children and families, as well as support for an expanded and strengthened social services delivery to the families. In addition, another project which looks specifically at the judicial legal processes and complementary measures is being implemented within the Organization of the Eastern Caribbean States.

Despite the absence of a National Plan of Action in the area of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, the above experiences to date and the actions being pursued at the programmatic levels lends credence to the view that Saint Lucia as a country supports the Stockholm Agenda for Action. Efforts

continue to be directed towards achieving the coordination of actions at the local, national and regional levels, and to maintain in focus a dual thrust of prevention and protection in its services to children. In areas of recovery, re-integration and child participation Saint Lucia has registered some efforts and programmatic successes as well.

In the preparation of this report, The Division of Human Services and Family Affairs attempted to incorporate information derived from various official sources, as well as to include the collective views of key representatives and organizations engaged in providing services to children. The views of some of the children who are involved in commercial sex, or have been sexually abused have also been reflected in the ensuing discussion on our experiences, the obstacles to policy development and the problems that favor the occurrence of sexual exploitation of children.

Sexual exploitation of children in Saint Lucia is a complex multi-dimensional problem with origins in the individual, familial, and socio-economic and cultural domains. It is possible to establish that there are several causes and linkage factors in this phenomena that contribute to its occurrence and maintains the involvement of children in the activities.

The reported incidence of sexual abuse has been consistently documented by the Division of Human Services and Family Affairs in their Child Abuse Registry since 1997, and the evidence suggest that there is an increase in the numbers of reported sexual abuse cases. In the Social Assessment Study of 2000 carried out by the Poverty Reduction Fund of Saint Lucia, the researchers included the following extracts which make reference to a problem of commercial sexual exploitation of children:

“Girls have affairs for money, mothers maybe gone abroad and left them or [they have] been abused by the men who visit their mothers. There are about 20 who still go to school but see

them at night. This is a new phenomenon of moms who were teenagers themselves and young grand-moms in their 30's.” (p.81)

“There is difficulty with young girls once sexually active, you can't supervise them at home, they are in the streets prostituting. They are 12 and 13 year olds in prostitution in a “rat house”. Even a 9 year old. Even boys are being abused and some instances with tourism in [the] Marina at North. Many send children in Castries begging for food.” (p.81)

Commercial sexual exploitation of children for the most part appears to be a problem that retains its status of invisibility because of the silence which generally surrounds the exploitation of the children. Detailed accounts of the situation are often limited and become accessible usually via the contact with the child participant who may present to the agency with some other related health or social problem. Nonetheless the elements within the socio-cultural and political environment which favor the commercial exploitation of children are fairly specific. In Saint Lucia, the analysis of the problem suggest that there is a direct relationship between structural adjustment in the economy and the impoverishment of families and the individual, with a resultant vulnerability to abuse. Other predisposing or linkage factors that have been identified include a history of sexual abuse, parental migration with resultant abandonment of the child, school drop outs, and a developing tourism sector.

A UNICEF study of 1998 (Report of community based surveys) of four poor communities in Saint Lucia indicated that at least 12-30% of the children had gone to school three or less days. The reason for the absence were illness in more than half of the cases and a lack of money or a lack of food in more than a third of the cases.

In the Cargill report on the "Socio-Economic Impact of Banana Restructuring in Saint Lucia" (1998), it was reported that levels of child abuse, domestic violence and alcoholism had increased because of the economic crisis. With the decline in the banana industry it is unclear to what extent those children who previously contributed to the workforce of the small farming household by staying away from school on banana reaping and packing days, are now being directed into other forms of income generating activities to maintain an economic contribution in the family.

The migration of heads of households (usually women) in search of employment is another factor that increases the vulnerability of children to sexual exploitation. This economic migration usually occurs at the expense of children. In some instances the resultant denial of supervision and care of children forces the children to pursue economic survival strategies. In their efforts to care for themselves, these children risk becoming school drop outs, and exposed to early and repeated teen pregnancies, drug abuse and HIV/AIDS.

In a video documentary on "Children of the Night" (2000), the problem of child-adolescent prostitution in St. Lucia reached visibility. Children in this documentary described themselves as being assembled on specific streets at nights waiting to be picked up by men to engage in reckless behaviors and prostitution. The children were described as being between the ages thirteen and sixteen, and being recruited by each other or adults into the activity. A history of being out of school for as much as four years was common denominator in the description.

A report by the Saint Lucia Association of Social Workers (1999) presents a similar picture of concern. This document speaks to the problem of young girls, many with a history of sexual and physical abuse, spending their time on the streets, using and trafficking drugs and exposed to HIV and AIDS. In this report reference is also made to a known phenome-

non of girls frequenting the mini-bus drivers for money in exchange for sex and some of the girls are described as "free lance prostitutes". Other anecdotal reports suggest that some girls have pimps who pay them with drugs and keep them trapped in a lifestyle, and that there are girls between ten to eighteen years who are involved in prostitution at known locations as brothels. Boys reportedly are engaged in homosexual activities, and client services are described as being as diverse as the customers themselves who are involved.

Beyond the socio-economic factors are a number of sub-cultural practices and norms that seem to favor and shore up the occurrence of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of children. The acceptance of "arrangement" money from the perpetrator to "resolve" a reported case of sexual abuse, and the reluctance to follow through with a criminal case are well discussed and known practices within the country. In some cases, as cited by social work practitioners, mothers have willingly promoted the sexual initiation of their young adolescent daughters with adult men in exchange for payment. In other instances, it is reported that girls in schools are registered by "guardians" who are in fact men that assume the economic responsibility for these adolescents in exchange for their sexual involvement with them. These girls are vulnerable to early and repeated pregnancies, and to entering a world of dependency on "child father" money.

The discussion on these associated problems that favor the occurrence of sexual exploitation of children points to a number of associations between poverty, culture and social values. Various dynamic forces and structural conditions have generated and maintained this problem to date. The nexus of psychosocial, economic, cultural and political factors are just some of the issues which must be addressed if the children of Saint Lucia are to become less vulnerable to the problem of sexual exploitation. Critical components which must be tackled successfully are the protection of children through a reformed legal proc-

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ess on one hand, coupled by changed social , family and cultural practices which speak to the value of childhood and a genuine commitment to protection of children.

The Social Assessment Study of Saint Lucia conducted in 2000 has already provided adequate justification for continued action and the urgent adoption of a strategy.

“Under reporting and ignoring the problem means increased costs. The social budgets of the nation are already paying some of these

costs. Girls coping with abuse tend to drop out of school and when cases are repeated they run away from their homes, enter the prostitution sector or become homeless, delinquent and end up as criminal cases. Teenage pregnancy is another effect of child sexual abuse”.

The reduction of these social costs through focused, coordinated and sustained preventive, protective and rehabilitative programs for families and children is the important national action that Saint Lucia recognizes it must take.