

# Kids understand

## how other kids hurt

*Children and adolescents speak out about sexual exploitation*

### To end sexual exploitation, children and adolescents recommend:

1. Governments and civil society provide more education, life skills and information to adults and children
2. Parents should love and protect their children with action
3. Governments must protect children
4. Law enforcement agencies uphold laws and eliminate corruption
5. Adults respect and include young people as equal participants and partners in this work
6. Communities, civil society, children, adolescents and governments work together

During 2007 and 2008, World Vision (WV) consulted over 400 boys and girls across the world involved in our projects that address the sexual abuse and exploitation of children and adolescents. Young people aged 10–21 from Africa (9), Europe (26), Asia (165) and Latin America (257)<sup>1</sup> shared stories of how they have dealt with and are already engaged in combating such abuses in their communities. This diverse group share a common concern: the protection of children and adolescents from sexual abuse and exploitation.



*Children in Latin America share about their rights and preventing sexual exploitation.*

As a child-focused organisation working in nearly 100 nations, World Vision abhors the abuse and exploitation of children and adolescents and undertakes advocacy and programmes to end it. We have been at the forefront of child protection efforts in some of the most difficult contexts. Our experience has taught us that children are key agents of change and transformation in their communities and must be heard and included as equal partners. It is critical that adults, parents, civil society, the private sector and governments listen to the voices of these children and adolescents and act together on their recommendations.



*Young people say teachers play a critical role in protecting them from sexual exploitation.*

<sup>1</sup> The children and adolescents consulted were from Ghana, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Lesotho, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Romania, Thailand (includes ethnic Burmese), Myanmar, Vietnam, Cambodia, Costa Rica and Colombia. The opinions of youth from Costa Rica and Colombia were gathered earlier through a similar consultation process in 2007 and are included in this report. Not all countries reported gender and age disaggregated data, but of those that did, the ratio was 60% girls to 40% boys consulted.

## How are children and adolescents sexually exploited?

The children and adolescents in WV focus group discussions identify trafficking, child sex tourism, and the prostitution of children as the primary methods of commercial sexual exploitation in their communities.

Particularly troubling is that young people report that **parents and adults in authority are often part of the problem of the sexual exploitation of children.**

Children in Latin America explain, “commercial sexual exploitation is when the parents sell the body of their daughter or son in exchange for money, expensive objects or food”.

Young people in Thailand describe how parents take their children to be prostituted, naming the hotels where this happens. “The hotel owner is the agent. Both Thai people and foreigners buy sex. Typically, a 60-year-old man pays for sex with boys as young as five years old. These men are wealthy. The parents take their children to the hotel to do this.”

Teachers pressure children too. Participants report how boys were abused by a group leader in a school for detained children. From Vietnam, children explain, “some

teachers could take advantage of bad grades for sexual abuse. For example, if a child lets a teacher abuse him or her, he or she can get a better grade.”

Young people also identify children who are particularly vulnerable; in Thailand, children explain that “migrant children are unable to advocate for their rights because of their illegal status. Sometimes kids come as illegal migrants so even if they are exploited and go to the police, [the police] do not care.”



Most participants describe how adults prey upon their vulnerabilities and innocence, promising to provide jobs, train them as famous singers or actors, marry them, show them the world, or provide material security.

*A girl in Thailand explains her drawing of forms of exploitation.*

## Consequences of sexual exploitation:



*African adolescents are already advocates working to end the sexual exploitation of their peers.*

Young people point out that children and adolescents who have been sexually exploited often face many mental, physical and social challenges such as: depression, trauma, disease (including HIV), pregnancy, fear,

shame, isolation, low self-confidence, lack of education, humiliation from others, rejection, loss of relationship

with their families, and loss of social standing. Survivors may be forced to leave the community and may even want to commit suicide.

In some cultures, girls who have been sexually exploited may be rejected from future marriage due to stigma and fear. (Cambodia) In other cases, “when a girl is abused, the family may force her to get married even if she is not at a right age for marriage”. (Vietnam) Additionally, many of these girls “cannot get a birth certificate for a child [born] from an abusive case”. (Vietnam) Young people are also concerned that both community members and law enforcement blame survivors. “People with a lack of knowledge do not understand, and blame them; therefore the community should have empathy to help affected children and treat them as their own children.” (Myanmar)

## Why are children and adolescents sexually exploited?

WV asked young people why children and adolescents are sexually exploited. Their top answers:

### (1) Lack of information and education

The lack of information, life skills and formal education among young people and those adults who should protect them is seen as the number one cause of sexual exploitation. “If children are not aware of the dangers, they don’t know what kind of things could happen to them.” (Romania) Young people are vulnerable because of a “lack of life skills and they do not know how to protect themselves”. (Vietnam) In addition, “school [curriculums] often avoid sexual and safe sex issues, so children do not have enough information to protect themselves from bad sexual experiences”. (Vietnam) “Literacy rates among women are very low. They are easily deceived because they simply believe the recruiters/traffickers [making women and their children vulnerable].” (Cambodia)

### (2) Lack of caring parents and families

Every group of young people identifies “lack of care and attention of parents” (Vietnam) and “broken families” (Thailand) as root causes of sexual exploitation. “I think it’s easy to take advantage of children because they can’t really protect themselves – especially if they come from dysfunctional families, if they feel alone and if the parents don’t make sure they stay safe.” (Romania) “Domestic violence [including sexual abuse] pushes children to leave their home and end up in situations where they are sexually exploited, sometimes in brothels.” (Cambodia) Many young people also describe rape as beginning a cycle of commercial sexual exploitation.



*Young people in Cambodia discuss the causes and solutions to sexual exploitation of children and adolescents.*



*Children in Romania discuss sexual exploitation.*

### (3) Weak law enforcement

Many young people are concerned with “poor law implementation and corruption among the government officials”. (Cambodia) “If nothing is done to the people who commit these acts, [the abuse] continues day after day.” (Uganda) When police are corrupt, there are few trusted people to turn to. “Police have a vested interest in the sex industry, as brokers and customers; prior to a raid they advise the karaoke bar owners so that the under-age girls can be moved. Arrests tend to occur only when a raid involves police officers from outside the local area.” (Thailand)

### (4) Poverty and material desires

All the groups identify the lack of money as a reason for the sexual exploitation of young people. “People have to go and search for a job and then they get exploited.” (Bosnia and Herzegovina) “I think children are being sexually exploited because of poverty. Families tend to use the girl to get food. They force girls to engage in sex to live. The girls are not given a chance to agree or disagree.” (Tanzania) “In some areas of our country, [illegal] armed groups use the children, especially girls, because their money makes them powerful. I think that poverty and forced displacement have made many children become victims of sexual exploitation in our country.” (Colombia)

Young people identify that sexual exploitation happens because of poverty, and sometimes because young people desire material goods. “Poverty, poor education and less income are the root causes of sexual exploitation of children. When perpetrators show off luxuries like cell phones, money or other valuable things such as jewellery, which poor people also want to have, then the parents let their children go with the recruiters/traffickers.” (Cambodia)



# To end sexual exploitation, children and adolescents recommend:



## (1) Governments and civil society should provide more education, life skills and information to adults and children.

Most of the consulted children and adolescents feel access to adequate information and formal education for themselves and adults is a priority to help protect young people and create safer communities. Governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), civil society and the private sector can all help.

- \* Information should appeal to young people: "communicate the message of child abuse in television with video clips" and on local radio programmes, through flyers and posters in public places with available hotlines, and "have a handbook on [the prevention of] child sex abuse that is colourful and has more pictures to attract younger people". (Vietnam)
- \* Community leaders, including faith leaders, should raise awareness; "The religious leaders should talk about protection of children during religious ceremonies." (Cambodia) "Priests must know more about it for the children's sake; and can teach children about [sexual exploitation]." (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
- \* Education is the best hope of recovery for survivors; "welcome survivors back to schools and communities" (Vietnam), "value her as a normal person" (Cambodia) and "involve survivors in normal social activities in our society to pave a positive way for her life". (Cambodia)

### Governments must ensure quality formal education for all

- \* Young people want "formal education and knowledge sharing to be conducted widely". (Myanmar) "Schools should raise more awareness of the risk of child abuse in contemporary society and teach children how to respond in high-risk situations." (Vietnam)
- \* Teachers have a part to play in prevention through sharing real stories of sexual exploitation of children and distributing child-friendly materials, incorporating the information into mainstream curriculum and lesson plans.



A Thai child illustrates sexual exploitation in the community.

- \* "It all starts with education – of the children and the parents . . . and also with access to information." (Romania) "Educate parents and children on how to protect themselves." (Thailand) "Knowledge of child sex abuse and life skills are important to protect us." (Vietnam)
- \* "More activities to raise awareness in the village" – practical information like the "tricks of traffickers among peers and in the community . . . the tricks of pimps" (Cambodia), hotlines for help, and safe migration.



Children in Thailand were asked to draw pictures of the ways children in their community experience sexual exploitation. They voted for this illustration as an accurate picture of child sex tourism. The three people are near a hotel, the blond male foreigner is saying in Thai "Mmm, yummy", the mother is saying "Happy! I'm going to earn some money" and the child is saying "Sad. Please help me".



This illustration by a Thai child depicts a foreigner who is 25 years old, buying sex from a 12-year-old Thai girl. Above them reads, "Take your happiness at the children's expense". The message on the side reads, "Thai children are at risk of being led down the wrong path. Adults, take care of your children!"



(Cambodia) "If teachers will start teaching us, guiding us and telling us of the disadvantages of having sex at an early age, that will protect us very much." (Lesotho) "There should be meeting among teachers and parents about the commercial sexual exploitation of children." (Cambodia)

drinking and drug use; and not re-marrying spouses that might rape or maltreat their children." (Cambodia)

- \* Create safe schools with "a good environment, no pressure or violence to students – this will attract students, which will reduce drop-out ratios. Many drop-out students end up sexually exploited." (Cambodia)

## (2) Parents should love and protect their children with action.

Young people want protective, loving, safe families and for parents to be good role models, informed and involved in order to prevent children from engaging in unsafe activities that can lead to sexual exploitation.

- \* "Children want and need love, attention, protection – especially from the parents and community." (Myanmar) "Strong families and warm families can protect children." (Thailand) "Treat all children equally so all children can feel loved and not vulnerable." (Vietnam)
- \* "Parents should be informed to be able to protect and guard their children." (Bosnia and Herzegovina) "Parents should teach children about the risk of sexual abuse. For example, fathers can talk to their daughters about appropriate behaviours between male adults and young girls, such as hugs and holding hands." (Vietnam) Survivors call on parents to protect children through: keeping them in school; not leaving them alone when working; ending domestic violence and sexual abuse, gambling,



Children around the world want better protection on the internet.

- \* "Parents must not keep silent if a rape case happens in the family or village." (Cambodia) Parents should also "encourage children to speak up in order to learn whether a child is abused". (Vietnam)

## (3) Governments must protect children.

Children and adolescents want governments to ensure social protection for themselves and their families. Governments must:

- \* Value children through funding the protection and prevention of child prostitution, trafficking and sex tourism. "Encourage governments to pay attention and prioritise sexual exploitation problems, giving attention at the community levels, as the issue may be a small problem for the government but it is a big issue for those affected." (Thailand)

# To end sexual exploitation, children and adolescents recommend: (continued)

- \* Partner with NGOs to “establish help centres and systems, counselling and hotline services” (Thailand), “expand child-friendly care centres” (Myanmar) and “co-operate together to set up child protection networks at the grass-roots level” (Cambodia).
- \* Increase job opportunities “for the parents of children who are in difficult circumstances” (Myanmar) and “for people in the rural areas, because when most of them have enough income, children will have a chance to go to school and there will be no need to earn money to support the family – so children will not migrate to work other places” (Cambodia).
- \* Protect children from pornography through: enforcing “a policy on internet shops so children will not go there and get a bad influence” (Vietnam), restricting their “access to bad websites” (Vietnam), “punishing people who create pornographic websites, which are against the law” (Thailand), and “[eliminating] pornographic material from the internet” (Kenya).

## (4) Law enforcement agencies should uphold laws and eliminate corruption to prosecute and prevent the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents.

- Young people recognise that laws and international agreements (such as the *Convention on the Rights of the Child* and the *Stockholm Declaration and Agenda for Action*) exist to protect them from sexual exploitation but they see a problem with corruption and the enforcement of those laws in their communities.
- \* “Practically and effectively use the existing related laws and policies.” (Myanmar) “Police need to enforce laws about sexual exploitation so that those who are committing these acts know it is wrong and the police should not allow it to continue.” (Uganda)
  - \* “Stop corruption from police along the border [where trafficking occurs] and take action to arrest the offenders.” (Cambodia) “We should punish corrupt officers in order to stop the people who spend money to rescue themselves from the punishment of the law.” (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

- \* “When [the police] come to know the case, immediately take action – no need to wait for the complaint from the victim.” (Cambodia) Authorities should believe children when they share their stories of abuse and exploitation and should not abuse power. “Do not threaten, blame or use bad words to victims, especially child victims.” (Cambodia)
- \* “Laws should be harsher – sex crimes should have stronger, stricter punishment.” (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

## (5) Adults should respect and include young people as equal participants and partners in the work to end the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents.

- Children and adolescents see themselves as active participants to combat this abuse as they can communicate and better understand the reality of their peers, and they are already engaged in solving the problems that affect them.
- \* “So far, children’s views were ignored” and, as a result, “they suffer without being able to make decisions”. (Latin America) “Listen to the problems and voices of the children regarding children’s issues”, “encourage children to express themselves and their ideas more in public” and “create forums for children to speak out”. (Thailand and Vietnam) “Adults should not look down on children and mock their opinions.” (Myanmar)
  - \* “Youth have more understanding about issues that affect them – kids understand how other kids are hurt and can help adults find the solutions.” (Thailand) “Most often children have different perspectives on things. The adult could discover things that they didn’t think of or didn’t consider as being important, by talking to children and young people.” (Romania) Young people can also partner through “peer-to-peer awareness raising based on real incidents that occurred among vulnerable children” and can “interfere if they see an attempt made by an adult [to sexually exploit a child]”. (Myanmar)



Girls in Vietnam share their ideas on how to end sexual exploitation.

## (6) Communities, civil society, parents, children, adolescents and governments should work together to end the sexual exploitation of children and adolescents.

- \* “Friends, parents, teachers, police, psychiatrists and the state can help.” (Bosnia and Herzegovina)
- \* “Society as a whole should realise that this is not an isolated problem but one that has to do with all of us . . . we all have a certain responsibility and we need to be very attentive to what is going on with the people around us.” (Romania) “We all must work together with joined hands” to achieve our goals and commitments (Myanmar) as the sexual exploitation of children is “the responsibility of every member of a community or society as a whole.” (Romania) “If everyone did their part, the problem would be solved.” (Thailand)



The girls in Neavear Thmey, a WV trauma recovery centre in Cambodia,<sup>1</sup> drew pictures like the one here of “the river of life” to express their lives: past, present and future. Through their drawings they described how, in the past, some stopped studying because of poverty or sick parents, or had to move homes because of the shame of being raped by a person in the village; some were cheated by close friends

with the promise of a job, forced to work in a brothel that masqueraded as a coffee shop, sent to prison and isolated from family. But when they described their present lives, they shared their happiness to have friends, a skill, read and write, and to receive “love from care-givers, teachers and staffs”. For the future, they wanted “to be a tailor, to earn money, to support my family”, “to continue studying”, “to have my own house”, to experience no “barriers in my life again”, and they hoped “that everybody in the world is happy”.



<sup>1</sup> World Vision established Neavear Thmey, a trauma recovery centre, in Cambodia, to support girls who have been sexually abused, raped or trafficked. Most girls stay in the concealed home for 6–12 months, where they receive counselling, health care, basic education and vocational training. In the decade since the centre opened its doors, staff have helped more than 700 girls, aged 6–18.





## Call to action:

Children and adolescents cannot wait any longer for adults to close the gap between past intentions and commitments, and today's reality of abuse and exploitation. We all must "protect the children of the world, fight for their right to a better life; make sure that their future is one that we can all be proud of!" (*Romania*) Children and adolescents are counting on adults to take this message to heart and to respond through joining them with action.



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To learn more about the WV Focus Group Discussions with Children and Youth contact Ruthi Hoffman-Hanchett at [Ruthi\\_Hoffman@wvi.org](mailto:Ruthi_Hoffman@wvi.org)