

Stockholm Congress Panel Report: Health

This panel heard contributions from the Chair, Dr Mehari Gebre-Medhin, Uppasala University (Sweden); Dr Mark Belsey, WHO (Switzerland); Dr Werasit Sittitrai, UNAIDS (Switzerland); Debra Whitcomb, EDC (US). The Rapporteur was Mary Roodkowsky, UNICEF (US).

This report also includes main points of discussion from three of the workshops on health-related topics: Adolescent health; psycho-active substance abuse; and harmful traditional practices.

Workshops were also held on the Global Programme on AIDS, on mental health, and on victims' needs.

Health must be broadly considered

When discussing children who are sexually abused, physical, mental and psycho-social well-being all need to be considered. It is also important to discuss health not only in terms of absence of pathology, but as a state of overall well-being.

Health and exploitation: a two-way connection

There is a dynamic interconnection between child health in these senses, and sexual exploitation: exploitation causes illness, both physical and psychological. A state of ill health makes a child more vulnerable to sexual exploitation, and health is an important prerequisite for not being exploited.

For example, with respect to AIDS: the spread of HIV has become both a cause and consequence of the trade in children. Some men seek children who they believe are less likely to be infected with the virus. In turn, a child who has sexual relations with an infected man is likely to become infected. Children also suffer psychologically from such exploitation.

Developmental windows for growth and vulnerability

There are certain times in a child's development when s/he has the opportunity to make developmental strides, physically or psychologically. A lack of stimulus at these times, or the absence of a context supportive to this development, can retard or even prevent the child's growth. The sexual exploitation of children, coming at the time of one or more of these windows of opportunity, can impair the child's growth, development, and ability to mature, even permanently. For example, a child abused when at the stage of learning to bond or to trust adults, may not be able to form appropriate trusting relationships. Moreover, children who are unwanted are two to three times more likely to be abused than other children.

Similarly, there are times when a child is particularly vulnerable physically. A pre-pubescent girl whose reproductive tract is still developing is very vulnerable to disease and dysfunction. Infection in girls who have sexual relations at a young age is a major contributor to infertility. There are difficult and destructive social consequences of this for many women, whose status in the family and even economic well-being is contingent on their reproductive success.

Social factors contribute to child vulnerability

In addition, social factors also contribute to the vulnerability of children. Adults who are mentally ill may exploit them. The children may arrive in environments where they are more susceptible to exploitation – for example the streets – because of the socio-economic conditions at home. Their community and their cultures may give them insufficient protection because the rights of the child are not fully acknowledged. Laws, for example, may neither protect children nor punish the exploiters.

The role of poverty

Poverty was cited as a major contributor to the vulnerability of children and hence to sexual exploitation, particularly in Africa. Children may be forced to work on the street or in domestic service. In both cases, they enjoy less adult protection and are far more exposed to the possibility of sexual exploitation.

In some parts of the world, including in Latin American cities, young mothers as young as 12 or 13 who cannot support their children may turn to prostitution.

Early marriage is often related to poverty. In some parts of the world, girls as young as 12 or 13 may be married off to older men. This eliminates the family's economic commitment to the girl. In some cases, money will be given to the family in exchange for the girl. This is a form of sexual trafficking.

The role of substance abuse

Another major contributor to the vulnerability of children is substance abuse which is both cause and effect of sexual exploitation. Firstly, alcohol or drug abuse in the home can create a threatening environment for the child, who may flee even to the street. These children are more vulnerable to sexual exploitation. They may even be co-opted into sex work to support a parent's needs.

Further, children on the street may themselves turn to substance abuse. They may seek psycho-active substances to relieve the pain of a dysfunctional environment, or caused by sexual exploitation. Such abuse leaves them in turn more vulnerable again to sexual abuse. Exploiters either individually or in organized rings may purposely use psycho-active substances to control children.

Resilience of children, families and communities provides protection

In many cases, children in vulnerable situations nevertheless manage to remain healthy. Their innate resilience, and the presence of a supportive framework, can make it possible for them to cope with many challenges and to avoid being exploited sexually.

Some of the factors that contribute to a strong coping capacity include social and moral points of reference in the community, including a clear, caring adult protective presence. Adequate economic well-being is an important factor. Good communication skills empower children and make them less vulnerable.

These factors can be identified and strengthened to reduce children's vulnerability and to strengthen their resilience.

Beyond commercial exploitation

There is a need to look at child abuse in the broader sense, not only when it is motivated by commercial factors. For example, even when early marriage is not linked to commercial factors, it negates the rights of the girl. It also has critical health implications for the adolescent girl. Likewise, female genital mutilation is an abrogation of rights and causes severe health problems.

Areas of possible action

Those who cope can lead – Families and children exposed to risk factors respond differently. There is much to be learned from those in a community who, facing multiple risks, cope successfully. They can be supported in being leaders in their communities.

Basic education and information is needed – To reduce the vulnerability of children, a great deal of education and information is needed. Changing behaviour is a long and involved process.

Extensive work at the grassroots is necessary to change ideas about what is acceptable, and to popularize the concept that children have rights. This is particularly important where traditional behaviours, grounded culturally, are involved, for example related to female genital mutilation and early marriage.

Multidisciplinary approaches are successful – A multidisciplinary approach to child sexual abuse has proven useful. This approach involves professionals from various sectors in a coordinated response, from law enforcement, social work, medical personnel, and victims' advocates. Community-based 'children's advocacy centres' support these multidisciplinary teams. Through this coordination, the burden on the affected children can be reduced. Moreover, children whose medical and emotional needs are met can participate better in the prosecution of offenders.

Involving children themselves – Efforts to curb the sexual exploitation and abuse of children must involve young people themselves. Services designed to help young people may not correspond to the needs as defined by the young people themselves. Youth can be involved in defining what services are needed, and in helping to design and even manage and evaluate them, to the extent possible. Organizations of youth, such as the Scouts and Guides, can and should also be mobilized.

The need for legislation – Even in the face of factors that contribute to vulnerability, including poverty, many families cope well and their children are safe from exploitation. There are clearly other factors that contribute to the exploitation of children. Strong legislation is critical as a means of discouraging and preventing the sexual exploitation of children. These laws should be enforced.

Creating awareness about the rights of the child and about the Congress – The results of the Congress and about child rights need to be disseminated widely. This needs to be done at all levels, through the mass media, and through work at the community level. One of the factors that prevents progress against CSEC is that these crimes are hidden, so a first step is to open such a discussion. Initial response to queries indicate that the Internet could be harnessed as a means of exchanging information and experience to curb this problem. UNICEF is looking at ways of incorporating such information on its own home page on the web, as well as on the home page created for the Congress.

High-level leadership – The concerned UN agencies, including UNAIDS, WHO and UNICEF, will be issuing joint policy statements on CSEC and actions that can be taken jointly by governments, civil society and by and within the United Nations. Funding agencies, both governments and intergovernmental agencies, should make greater levels of support available for efforts to end the sexual exploitation and abuse of children.

Consensus on broadening the discussion – The need to broaden the discussion from CSEC was widely expressed. Sexual abuse apart from that motivated commercially needs to be addressed.