

Stockholm Congress Panel Report: Prevention and Psycho-social Rehabilitation

The panel on Prevention and psycho-social rehabilitation heard contributions from the Chair, Marian Wright Edelman, President & Founder (USA); Sandra Prunella Mason, UN Committee on the Rights of the Child (Barbados); Milena Grillo, Executive Director (Costa Rica); Dr Elisabeth Marcelino (Philippines), Margaret de Monchy, UNICEF (Cambodia); Josephine Muli, social worker (Kenya); Jane Warburton, Consultant (UK). The panel Rapporteurs were Jane Warburton and Teresa de la Cruz, research consultant (Philippines).

Summary of panel discussion

The Chairperson, Marian Wright Edelman, acknowledged the important of the Congress as a response to the heinous nature of abuse, its growth and the opportunity for concerned and caring adults to find responses to the issue. She cited the universal nature of the problem of CSEC, using examples of the manifestation of the problem in the US. Despite a lack of clarity, it is suggested that here the average of those entering prostitution is 14, and the numbers exploited in prostitution are between 200,000 and 300,000. The causes of a child's vulnerability to commercial sexual exploitation in the US bear significant similarities with factors that operate in other countries, and include dysfunctional families, poverty, experience of other forms of abuse. For all the problems, early and sustained intervention, targeting and promoting supportive networks, aimed at preventing the root causes, is vital. But through prevention is the key, it is not a perfect safety net. To end CSEC, legal steps need to be instituted and effective steps that can change social and cultural attitudes that allow the exploitation to occur. There are clear anomalies in a system that punishes the child involved in prostitution, while failing to criminalize the actions of those who patronize juvenile prostitutes. In the moral vacuum of many societies, "when we adults create a culture that has sexuality and consumerism completely intertwined", it is hardly surprising that sex, money and childhood become interconnected in complex and compelling ways.

The panel members presented papers that covered strategies for identifying and developing appropriate models for intervention, moving from a broad overview to specific recovery strategies and prevention projects.

Jane Warburton introduced the work of a number of NGOs, working in many different countries, which provided the basis for the report "A right to happiness", part of the contribution of the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child. This gives insights into the manifestation of this abuse of children through commercial sexual exploitation in many different parts of the world, and details programming responses to it. It outlines the horrendous consequences for children, their families and their communities of this phenomenon. "Forty per cent of children working with a Thai NGO tested HIV-positive." It outlines factors within societies, individuals and families that heighten vulnerability and increase the risk of becoming involved in the sex trade. It identifies abusers, predominantly local men exploiting local children, as a reality that must be confronted. It suggests that, for effective intervention, programmes need to see children as survivors, not passive victims. They, their families and communities have a key role to play in the development, valuation and implementation of strategies to combat the problem.

It seems clear that rehabilitation and preventative programmes are co-dependent; neither can exist in isolation. For both to be effective, sensitising and awareness raising of the public to the scale and impact of this abuse of children is essential. The legal system, to provide a supportive framework for other efforts, must protect and not victimize children. Children need to be placed at the centre of planning. The integration and coordination of services and responses across a range of disciplines, but including medical, social and economic, is essential if their needs are to be adequately met. Settings for rehabilitative intervention vary, but the focus must be on the

successful reintegration of children into their communities. All programmes, whether preventative or rehabilitative, need to ensure that they increase and strengthen respect for the children, rather than further victimizing and disempowering. The potential of the children is evident in many of the projects: the prostituted children trained and functioning as para-lawyers in Ethiopia, those acting in plays depicting the horrors of the sex trade in Brazil, the child counsellors and health educators in the Philippines. Programmes must be sensitive to their cultural context. There is no blueprint for effective intervention, but there are general principles that can cross geographical and cultural boundaries.

Margaret de Monchy spoke of a project in Cambodia which recognized the difficulties of competition for scarce resources in a country with such wide-ranging needs. It also took into account the incidence and particular manifestation of CSEC in Cambodia, where it is estimated that 35 per cent of sex workers are aged 12-17 years, 86 per cent of whom were sold, tricked or abducted into the sex trade. The model was one aimed at maximum participation of communities. The programme, 'Community Action for Social Development', focused on the child and looked at ways of incorporating systems for support, nurture and protection into all the basic elements of the project. An example was the linking of the criteria for credit facilities and income generation opportunities with parental care of their children, ie not selling or encouraging the children to enter the sex trade. There are barriers to participation: social breakdown, scepticism, grinding poverty, etc. but, if real empowerment of communities is to occur, then we need to understand and break through the impediments. This is the only real alternative; despite all the commitments, we cannot reach every child. Families and communities need to be assisted and encouraged to take responsibility for their children.

Elisabeth Marcelino spoke of the need to move thinking away from a belief in one model for understanding and assisting child victims of CSEC. Western models are not the only approaches; others that take the cultural realities of the child, their social context and understanding into account are essential, if the children are to be reached. This is not a simple regard for traditional ways of working, but involves a radical reorientation for many of us trained in the western models of psychology. It must incorporate other paradigms that operate from children's vision of themselves and the world, using their history, culture and literature. The eastern philosophies and interpretations are essential for understanding children in those countries which have such a large number of exploited children. One example of this is the inappropriateness for children in the Philippines of the western concept of self, which emphasizes individualism, rather than the shared identity that corresponds with their reality. While we refer to the evil of CSEC, we need to understand the relevance and importance of confronting it with a higher good; we need to use and nurture the spiritual component for children to be healed, to gain an inner peace. If this can be achieved, "there is hope for the flowers".

Milena Grillo spoke of the need for mobilization if the problem of CSEC is to be prevented, and outlined strategies for developing such a movement. She spoke of four components:

- Prevention strategies need a framework, clarity and goals, to be successfully planned and implemented. Such strategies cannot just be improvised.
- This requires knowledge of the facts, national contexts, the environmental factors which allow CSEC to occur, the culture, profiles of the victims and the abusers, legal systems and other risk elements. In addition, protective factors within cultures and communities, those that engender or encourage resilience, need to be acknowledged and supported.
- The need to institute strategies for assisting those already victimized through exploitation.
- The need to enforce laws which protect children and punish perpetrators.

Once the degree and direction of the dangers is documented, the information needs disseminating and the proposals for change defined. Goals for interventions need to be fixed so that impact can be evaluated. These need to set with an awareness of the social perceptions of different sectors of the population. If there is to be cooperation and allocation of resources, then

their differing views of the problem need to be known. This allows negative concepts to be challenged, countering stereotypes. There are four key factors for success:

- Knowing the characteristics of the group is essential, to understand who can initiate, lead and have maximum credibility;
- Identifying key actors as allies in the programme;
- The involvement of all generations;
- The message must be convincing. It must be understood “that the right to development, the right to move forward of all the people, is denied if children are damaged and victimized, through this fundamental denial of their rights”.

Sandra Mason looked at factors contributing to the problem, including globalization. She indicated that the family, community, state and the international community shared the responsibility for the protection of children. She highlighted some protection strategies:

- Those reducing opportunities for the offence – these would include education to empower the child, reinforce individual constraints and inhibitors, and highlighting the consequences for abusers;
- Those promoting social welfare and strengthening protective systems;
- Those offering legislative protection, building on the rights of the child expressed in the CRC.

All require the will to coordinate, prioritize and implement.

Ms Mason also raised the issues regarding differences in respect of the age for consent to sexual relations and the age of majority. This creates anomalies and weakens the potential for protection of all children.

Josephine Muli is a community development worker in Kenya. She spoke of the programmes offered by her organization, UNDUGU (meaning ‘brotherhood’). Sexually exploited children, along with other children working and living on the streets, are approached with information about alternatives, including residential care that provides safe shelter, food, education and counselling, and help in moving towards independence. The programme acknowledges that “the best place for children is with their families and communities”, and the aim is reintegration, with financial support and ongoing monitoring. Lack of opportunities makes this task much more difficult.

There were nine workshops dealing with specific aspects of prevention and rehabilitation. From their descriptions of the situation in various countries, including the problems and challenges to be faced, and their hopes and recommendations for future action, the following points are offered (summary of recommendations from the panel and workshops):

Current situation (*note: in 1996*)

1. The situation is urgent and compelling. More and more children are being exploited through commercial sexual exploitation. The consequences for them, for their communities and for their countries are devastating. While it may be easier to see the issue as the responsibility of others, perhaps the sex tourist, or as a consequence of the dysfunctional family, or as a choice being made by the child herself, the reality is that, in almost all situations, it is local men exploiting local children that is the primary and most significant problem.
2. It is possible to identify those elements within societies that render individuals and families vulnerable to becoming exploited in the sex industry. Many of the workshops identified power differentials, internationally, within communities, between men and women, children and adults, the weaker being exploited and abused by the stronger. Poverty was a major

determinant but often it was coincidence with other elements that heightened risk of involvement.

3. On a positive note, many of the participants spoke of their experiences: interventions that can and do make a positive difference. Many of the groups stressed that it is vital to include and involve children as key players in defining the issues and developing responses to them. Some groups have demonstrated ways of moving from the rhetoric of participation to working on ways of overcoming the barriers and impediments. Young people have demonstrated that, through their involvement as actors in their own recovery, they can reassert their dignity and demonstrate their value and worth. Children are currently working as para-lawyers in Ethiopia; they are working in peer education programmes in the Philippines; they are disseminating vital health education messages in Brazil; they are or will be caring for babies orphaned by AIDS in South Africa.
4. In all countries, the interdependence of prevention and recovery has been identified. Prevention is vital if children are to be adequately protected, but assistance must be offered to current victims.

Problems and challenges

5. Many of the groups identified the discrepancies in terminology as an obstacle to fully understanding the manifestations and incidence of CSEC. The workshop addressing measuring and monitoring confirmed the misuse of language and data when reporting on the issue.
6. The legal system is one that can protect but, while we have near universal ratification of the CRC, we continue to hear of laws which are not enforced, which victimize the child through defining the experience of abuse as criminal, rather than confronting, punishing and deterring the abuser.
7. Change is not easy, quick or uni-directional. Children who have been subjected to exploitation over a period of time, need time, space and resources to effect recovery. For many of the children whose experience of the world is exploitative, degrading and dangerous, the process of change is not easy. For many children, it is further compounded by the drug or substance dependence that provides a cushion from the horrors of their everyday experience. Measurement of the impact of intervention programmes needs to take this into account, rather than assuming that a lack of immediate progress indicates 'failure'.
8. Despite commitments to the issue, it is impossible to reach every child. The challenge is to devolve protection to families and communities, working on those economic and social factors that create vulnerability. Efforts have to be directed at the societal ambivalence towards the issue, which tolerates the abuse of children by adults, while ensuring that the victims are not blamed or ostracized.
9. Many of the children who are abused through CSEC are multiply disadvantaged. The workshop on street children highlighted the difficulties and vulnerability of such children. Children in situations of armed conflict, children in countries experiencing major political and social upheaval, are all more vulnerable to exploitation and yet are also in situations where the plethora of other issues makes the competition for resources so much more difficult.
10. The disintegration of values, blamed by some on the exchange of information between the countries of the world, together with social upheaval, huge and increasing disparities in wealth etc, has been seen as a major challenge to those seeking to make changes.
11. Failures in real political commitment and the misuse of power by those in authority are cited as problems to be overcome.

Recommendations

12. Article 12 of the CRC articulates the child's right to be heard. If this right is to be taken seriously by all actors in this issue, this stresses their right to be involved as key players in all prevention and rehabilitation programmes. Intervention strategies that empower, listen and respect the voice of the child will be more effective.
13. Approaches to prevention and recovery must be child-centred and holistic, operating from a multi-disciplinary perspective. They have to take into account that children's welfare is affected by issues that go beyond simple 'children's issues'. In this respect, there were clear recommendations that commitments and improvements in the welfare and protection of children should be incorporated into criteria used in determining eligibility for development support and assistance at local, national and international levels.
14. This clearly would require clarity in defining the issue and in establishing indicators for measuring and monitoring incidence of this abuse.
15. The issue of defining the age of the child, who is deemed to merit protection, needs to be addressed nationally and internationally. The age of consent to sex is frequently lower than the age of majority. Few jurisdictions use the age of the child as defined in the CRC to determine those meriting particular protection.
16. Prevention strategies are crucial and must incorporate raising public awareness of the incidence and impact, and changing perceptions of the issue, where there is ambivalence or condoning of the sexual abuse of children. Protection of all children must be defined in terms both of their enjoyment of their rights and for the future development and welfare of all people. The positive role of the media in highlighting the issue was recognized, but the need for coverage to be ethical, sensitive and not risk the further indirect abuse of the child was also highlighted. They need to be addressed at a number of different levels, but the critical and practical role of families and communities in protecting their children needs to be affirmed and supported.
17. Prevention strategies are not sufficient; children cannot wait for social changes to occur and their experience of abuse requires support and assistance if the physical and psychological consequences are to be addressed. Programmes working with children who have been abused through CSEC need to focus on developing projects that incorporate the child's cultural and social realities. Western psychological models cannot just be transported to other settings; the appropriate interventions have to incorporate other philosophies and approaches to the self and to healing. There needs to be a recognition of the importance of human spirituality in effecting recovery.
18. Efforts must focus not just on the child as victim but must promote those aspects within children and communities that foster resilience and survival.
19. Recognizing that children need their families and communities for sustainable support, projects need to focus on the reintegration of children. This includes working with families and communities to encourage awareness and acceptance, to understand the child's victimization and to develop community-based systems that allow for alternative survival strategies and support.
20. Unless the pattern and process which results in children being sexually exploited is recognized as one which must focus on the demand for their services, one that turns the spotlight on the abusing adult, and the need for this abuse to be stopped through changing attitudes, enforcing laws and/or offering interventions for the abusers, further children will be victimized.
21. Despite the huge concerns about the current incidence of this abuse of children, there is hope. Projects are making a difference to the lives of the children who have been involved, and enhancing protection for others. We need to know about their approaches, benefit from

their experiences, evaluate and apply those that fit the cultural and social contexts within which we work.