

*This briefing note is a contribution of the NGO Group for the Convention on the Rights of the Child and ECPAT International to the 2<sup>nd</sup> World Congress against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children.*

## **An important ally: the private sector**

Although much attention has been paid in recent years to the responsibility of governments and the work of child welfare agencies in efforts to eliminate commercial sexual exploitation of children, little has been said about the private sector. And yet large corporations, small businesses and individual private sector employers and employees have important contributions to make.

The International Labour Organization, for example, has noted that shopfloors are themselves 'communities' of workers and thus, like all communities, contain both abusers and potential protectors of children. Mobilization and awareness-raising campaigns at shopfloor level, therefore, are potentially useful programming against CSEC, and the involvement of trade unions, employer organizations and individual companies in such programming would be a very active way for the private sector to contribute to fighting the commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Unfortunately, if any attention has been paid at all to the private sector, it has invariably been to those components associated with activities linked to travel, tourism and entertainment, or to companies working in the area of Internet technology and service provision.

### **The tourism and entertainment sectors**

Much of the early work done by organizations campaigning against the commercial sexual exploitation of children focused on the phenomenon known as 'child sex tourism', which involves both individuals and groups travelling with the intention of buying children for sex. Both men and women, paedophile and non-paedophile, are implicated in this criminal behaviour, and most of them have to book travel, arrange accommodation and buy services provided by travel agents, hotels, bars and restaurants, resorts and transport companies.

Whether by adopting and adhering to strict codes of conduct on use of their facilities, reporting suspected abuse, or implementing codes relating to the behaviour of their staff, tourism- and entertainment-related businesses are particularly well placed to join in efforts to eliminate commercial sexual exploitation.

A number of initiatives have been taken by professional associations in this area. The World Tourism Organization has worked closely with ECPAT to devise a charter that promotes responsible behaviour by its members in tourism-related sectors. Individual businesses as well as franchised outlets have implemented strict rules governing travel, accommodation and related activities that might facilitate commercial sexual exploitation, and many proudly display stickers denoting their part in the effort. Several major airlines regularly run in-flight videos to raise awareness of child sex tourism, to warn potential abusers of the sanctions they face, and to mobilize other travellers to be vigilant and to report exploitative activity.

Beyond corporate responsibility, the role played by individual employees is also important and a number of companies have recognized this through incentives and awards for staff who make particular efforts to safeguard the rights of children. This may take the form of reporting violations of codes of conduct or suspected exploitative practices. Airline employees, ships' crews, hotel clerks, bus drivers, resort staff – all are in a position to alert management to children who seem to be at risk from local guests or tourists and to note when adults take children to their rooms or into secluded places, or otherwise seem to indulge in inappropriate behaviour with them.

Some very effective projects have been undertaken by trade unions in the Philippines, for example, to train workers in the hotel and entertainment sector to recognize signs of abusive behaviour. In the same project, management was also encouraged to work with trade unions to put in place mechanisms for employees to report their suspicions, and for checks to be made both to protect the children involved and also to make sure that non-offending clients are not inappropriately accused.

In many ways, this sort of programming extends the definition of community to the specific community of the workplace/professional or trade association, effectively setting up community watch groups that protect both children and the integrity of the company or establishment.

Increasingly, hotels and tourist resorts have found that it makes good business sense to protect both local and visiting children – effectively demolishing the once-cited argument that sex tourism is good for the economy.

### **Privileged position and power to act**

It is clear that the involvement of private sector companies and allied trade unions and professional associations is also important even if their area of activity is not related to tourism or entertainment. Such large groupings can have enormous mobilizing and motivating power and can provide facilities and opportunities for awareness-raising campaigns, volunteer activities and social mobilization.

A logical extension of the engagement of management and staff in efforts to protect children from commercial sexual exploitation is the introduction of incentives and awards for staff who volunteer their time or otherwise demonstrate exemplary commitment to making a difference. Where corporate incentive schemes have in the past sometimes included paid sex tours for male employees as a reward for performance, well-informed businesses now realize that the integrity of their company depends on the behaviour of their employees as well as on the company's own track record on social and rights issues. Business gurus agree that an ethical company is a good company.

Codes of conduct and better understanding – not to mention heightened awareness of the criminal nature of commercial sexual exploitation of children and the increasing introduction of extraterritoriality legislation that allows prosecution at home of crimes committed in other countries – are important contributions to the elimination of sexual exploitation. Again, the responsibility of private sector companies and corporations is clear: they must not only not allow inappropriate incentive/reward schemes to operate but must signal their outrage and determination to eliminate them and sanction anyone in their company involved in such activities.

The same is true of companies – and similarly governmental, non-governmental and inter-governmental agencies – who have employees stationed overseas. They have a responsibility to define clearly the limits of behaviour that will be tolerated and the sanctions that will be imposed on any violations of such behaviour. This makes sense not only in terms of protecting children from commercial sexual (or other forms of) exploitation but also emphasizes the human values of the organization.

Those who wish to abuse and exploit children are known to manoeuvre themselves into positions where they have easy access to them; there have been instances where aid workers and UN peace-keepers have abused their privileged positions to sexually exploit children, both for commercial profit and personal gratification. It is incumbent on all organizations, whatever their nature, to adopt recruitment and monitoring systems that prevent abusers and exploiters from approaching children. It is also important that any abuse or exploitation that do occur are acknowledged and swiftly and seriously dealt with.

### **Providing service to children**

The Internet service industries also have a responsibility to recognize and deal with cases of commercial sexual exploitation of children that occur in their domain. The last decade of the twentieth century saw an exponential increase in the number of homes and communities with access to the Internet. This key to the world's store of knowledge is potentially of enormous value to children, and many government and welfare agencies are working to promote access to the Internet for children whose lives it can transform.

But the Internet can and is abused by those who use its strengths in order to exploit children for sex. The fact that children can log in to the Internet at any time and in the privacy of their own home makes them a target for those who wish to isolate them and build exploitative relationships with them. The anonymity of the Net allows cyber-stalkers to hide their identity and entrap unsuspecting children by building relationships based on untruths and secrets. Even the most vigilant parents will find it difficult to know whom their child is meeting in a chat room accessed from the local library or Internet café.

The technology of web-based information storage and transmission also makes the distribution of child pornography easier. Where once pornography had to be sent through the post or exchanged from hand to hand, now it can be transmitted to hundreds of recipients across the globe, with the name of the sender buried under layers of re-transmission mechanisms. Web sites offering child pornography or information for exploiters are hidden among the hundreds and thousands of sites available through the Internet.

Alarmingly, these same dangers are now also present in cutting edge telephony technology. Children on buses, street corners, school playgrounds, access the Internet through the [w@p](#) facility on their portable telephones, receiving SMS messages and spam from around the globe.

But between the Net and the child there is a service provider. The Internet Service Provider (ISP) is in many ways the gatekeeper who can help the child open the gate to the multiple benefits of the Internet or facilitate the exploiter's passing through it to reach the child.

Since the first World Congress in 1996, ISPs and Internet watch groups have made serious efforts to define and agree corporate responsibility in protecting children from exploitation through the Internet. In Europe, as in North America, codes of conduct have been agreed to encourage ISPs to remove from their servers any material of a pornographic nature involving minors. There are still conflicting views as to whether this should be removed or reported to the police, who have an interest in trying to trace its provenance before it disappears. And there are still sectors of the Internet industry who argue that they provide only a storage and transmission service and cannot realistically check the content of what individuals post to/through this service. Increasingly, however, this argument is being challenged in law. The difficulty of applying laws in activities that are almost by definition cross-border, however, remains.

Increasingly, also, parents are intervening to try and build a barrier between Internet exploiters and their children. Filtering systems that allow parents to limit the content children can access via their computer have become widespread, despite concerns that such filters can be overridden by computer-competent children and do not, in any case, protect the child when he or she is not surfing from the home computer.

Clearly there is still much to be done to make the Internet safe for children. The role of ISPs, search engine providers, Internet watch groups and others whose business is in cyberspace, will continue to be important.