

## **In the name of culture and tradition**

“The tall, skinny girl hides her face behind the baby in her arms like a child might do with its doll. She shoos away the chickens that roam at her feet. It is only this protective movement that gives any suggestion the baby could actually be hers. She looks too young but, in fact, it is her second child. Like several girls who live in her tiny community, Tabatha was 12 years old when she married. Her cousin, Alice, who appears at the makeshift front door of the same shack, also married when she was 12. Her husband is 74... There is no running water inside the squalid shack, no toilet, and a family of eight share the two tiny rooms.”<sup>1</sup> This is not India or Africa; this home is just 650 km from Washington DC: it is Horse Creek, Kentucky, USA.

Much is said about the role of culture and tradition in the sexual exploitation of children, and most of it is said about the developing world, but the truth is that cultures and traditions in almost every corner of the world include societies where providing a child for sex, or facilitating sex with minors through early marriage -- often to old men who offer material benefit as in the case of Alice -- is accepted.

### **Early marriage**

Although in Kentucky the legal age of marriage is 16, local communities accept and even encourage the marriage of younger girls. “This is the Bible Belt,” Tabatha’s school principal is quoted as saying in explanation, “there’s a tradition of getting married early here because, not so long ago, life expectancy was short due to poor medical care. If you were going to die young, there was an urgency to get married.” There is a strange lack of logic in this explanation; but logic is not necessarily present when tradition and culture are cited.

Different reasons are given for early marriage in other countries, but they often are also justified on the grounds of tradition and culture: in Democratic Yemen, for example, where the majority of girls are married between the ages of 12 and 15 despite the Family Law which provides for imprisonment of those marrying girls below 16 years; or Nigeria, where 79 per cent of girls are married between the ages of nine and 15; or Northern Ethiopia, where girls as young as seven are married to teenage boys and grow up with them. In the Nizwa area of Oman, 27 per cent of girls are married before the age of 11 and, in some parts of Egypt, as many as four in 10 girls marry before the age of 16. Early marriage is also practiced in parts of Asia, and in some cultures temporary marriages are arranged as a way of legitimizing sexual activity with a young girl.

It is common for such practices to be defended on cultural grounds, and it is fashionable to declare that criticism of other cultures is imperialistic or patronizing, but the truth is that in many countries these cultural practices are in fact based on ideas of female inferiority and the need to control their labour and reproduction.<sup>2</sup>

It is also assumed that, in the case of under-age marriages, the parents make wise and considered choices for their children. In truth poverty, ambition and avarice can and do affect the choice, especially where there is a transfer of resources between the families as in the case of bride-price or dowry. In short, it is a question of girl children being exploited commercially and for sex.

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy Broadbent: “America’s child brides”, *Marie Claire*, January 1996

<sup>2</sup> Main source on early marriage: Antislavery International

## **Paying for the sins of the father**

The commoditization of children by parents is also at play in the system of sex slavery that sees thousands of girls working as unpaid servants and sex slaves to voodoo priests in parts of Western Africa. Exploited in order to pay for the sins of their families against traditional gods and spirits, a reported 35,000 girls as young as eight in Ghana, Benin, Togo and Nigeria work for fetish priests who treat them like slaves and often use them for sex. The girls, known locally as 'fetish slaves' or in Ghana *trokosi*, are victims of a tradition in which young virgins were once offered as slaves to appease the gods and to ensure success in war. Many of the girls give birth during their period of slavery and, when they are released, are unable to fend for themselves and their children.

Some moves have been made to end these practices. In Ghana, the government has turned the argument of tradition on the exploiters by using belief and ritual as a means of securing information from informants. Some fetish priests in Ghana have agreed to try to prevent families from handing over their daughters by accepting goats instead. Since many families consider a goat to be a better asset than a daughter, children's rights groups are providing funds for families to buy a goat for the transaction.<sup>3</sup>

## **Links to the sex trade and prostitute use**

In other parts of the world, exploitation of girls into the commercial sex trade and initiation of young boys as prostitute users are also justified on the grounds of religion, tradition or culture.

In India, the Rajnat tribal system and the *devadasi* system require that initiation into prostitution begins at puberty at the latest. These rural forms of prostitution are rooted in the exploitation of certain castes and tribes and the particularly low status of girls within these historically oppressed groups.<sup>4</sup>

The Rajnat tribe, for example, lives in scattered villages along the highways of Alwar district in Rajasthan; its economy is organized around the prostitution of children. Until the twentieth century, the Rajnat tribe was patronized by the Rajput monarchs and since then they have continued providing service to travelers along the highways. Farmers and merchants doing business in nearby towns, truckers plying the highways, rural landowners and Delhi businessmen now take advantage of this former royal privilege.

Some of these forms of child prostitution contain the trappings of Hinduism while others emerged from discrete tribal cultures, often related to the scheduled castes. Both religious and tribal systems of prostitution depend on ritual and traditional sanction. The *devadasi*, *basavi* and *jogin* systems fall in the category of prostitution characterized by traditional Hindu myth or ritual. The Bedias and Banjaras tribes, as well as a number of tribes in Rajasthan and the Dommara tribe in Andhra Pradesh, are organized socially around ritualized, but non-Hindu prostitution. However the prostituting of children is organized, it is generally characterized by male dominated community pressures, family ignorance and the exchange of goods, services or favours.

Family ignorance and the excuse of 'tradition' are also at the root of the initiation of young boys into commercial sex – not as child prostitutes but as child clients. This is prevalent in Latin America, Africa and some parts of Europe, where it is commonly associated with *machismo*. It is also common in the Philippines where, although much has done much in recent years to strengthen legislation to protect children from sexual exploitation and to punish perpetrators (including foreigners traveling to purchase sex with children), little has been done to tackle the roots of home-grown demand and widespread prostitute use.

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Bavender-Coyle, *The forgotten girl-slaves of West Africa*, Anti-Slavery Society of Australia

<sup>4</sup> Main source on India: Richard H Young and Helen Chernikoff, *Trafficking of children and prostitution*, UNICEF India country office, 1996.

Many families still follow tradition and initiate their sons into sex when they reach puberty by taking them to visit a prostitute, often with much fanfare and accompanied by male members of the family. Not only does this introduce boys to sexual activity at an early age, it encourages the practice of purchasing sex and reinforces male/female roles as client and service provider. And the 'client' side of the commercial sex equation is as yet not so often addressed as the 'victim' side so that, while many programmes are run to raise awareness among girls about their vulnerability to sexual exploitation, few programmes attempt to help boys understand the male role in exploitation.