

Globalization and consumer pressure

Globalization has broken down many of the barriers to progress that held back people – especially young people – all over the world, putting a higher price on their creative powers and hard work. The accompanying technology has bridged geographical divides that separated the ‘haves’ from the ‘have-nots’ in ways that could not even be dreamed of just a few decades ago.

But the same processes have widened other gaps, in some countries driving the poor into deeper poverty. And new barriers have been erected, built of the unrealizable aspirations of those who have access to images of a better life but no means to attain it.

The globalization of information through world-reaching television and radio networks, the spreading availability of consumer goods to worldwide markets that results from this leveling-out of knowledge on products and the mass marketing techniques that take advertising – both high-tech and low-tech – into the remotest and smallest communities, has led to consumer pressures that few communities are equipped to fully satisfy.

Market forces and unmet aspirations

Although critics of globalization most often quote the impact of these pressures on the poorest communities, more developed, affluent societies are also affected by the divide between advertising-led aspirations and desires and the ability to fulfil them. This gap between aspirations and fulfilment, in young people who additionally have unmet emotional needs or family deficit factors such as neglect or the stress of abuse, can lead to extreme behaviour.

Japan, for example, has seen the impact on its young people of powerful consumer pressures. Since the 1990s there have been many media reports of adolescent girls flirting with prostitution by selling sexual services – often on a casual or only semi-regular basis – in order to earn money to buy consumer goods otherwise beyond their reach. This almost *ad hoc* entry into commercial sex has come to be known as ‘compensated dating’.

Some argue (and it is regularly suggested in the press) that compensated dating is a question of choice and that there is no exploitation involved. This is to define exploitation very narrowly. Undoubtedly there is an exploitative link between producers and advertisers who aggressively push their products to children and young people who cannot afford to buy them. When (consumer) pressure mounts beyond tolerable levels, something has to give. Parents have long been encouraged to resist demands from their children that are seen as excessive, so if additionally the child is suffering emotional neglect or abuse, s/he may seek alternative sources of money and fleeting emotional closeness.

Confusing values and attitudes

At the same time, the cultural confusion that accompanies globalization, where the same products are marketed in widely differing societies, and values that are culturally appropriate in one society are transplanted into others, leaves children and young people in a ‘values vacuum’ where their bodies, sexual favours and self-esteem are difficult to weigh against a branded sweatshirt or the latest pair of sneakers. This, too, is commercially exploitative, putting the rights of children not to be manipulated and abused below the profit-making motive.

Commercialism, cultural confusion and values vacuum translate also into societies in less affluent countries. Even the smallest communities may be seen as potential markets by a world which pays

much less attention to helping them to achieve the levels of income necessary to purchase goods without compromising their well-being.

As a result there have been reports of families selling children into labour or sexual servitude in order to be able to buy a television or refrigerator. Such mercenary behaviour is not the norm, of course: as in all the issues surrounding commercial sexual exploitation of children, the trading of a child for a consumer goods is the result not only of consumer pressure but of ignorance, skewed values, the low value attached to the child and the girl child in particular, and persuasive forces that exploit and encourage others to exploit also.

Not all exploiters responsible for pushing children into commercial sex are pimps and procurers. Some are their family and friends. Advertising and big business, government economic and social policies, marketing and mass media can also be implicated in the exploitation of children for sex.