Commercial sexual exploitation and masculinity

A qualitative regional study of males from the general population

Summary of Results
Summary Results

The International Labour Office (ILO) is, through its International Programme for the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), providing support to the countries of Central America, Panama and the Dominican Republic for implementing Convention 182 – aimed at eliminating various forms of child labour and the economic exploitation of boys, girls and adolescents, including commercial sexual exploitation. The study entitled **Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Masculinity: A qualitative regional study of men from a broad spectrum of the population** (2004) was promoted as a tool for directing strategies aimed at the prevention of this social ill and, in particular, for designing effective campaigns to raise public awareness.

The information below shows the main results of the regional study, which included the participation of researchers from each country and was coordinated and written by Jose Manuel Salas, M.Sc., and Alvaro Campos, M.A., – both of whom are psychologists from the WEM Institute.

**Definition of commercial sexual exploitation**

Commercial sexual exploitation is the use of persons under 18 years of age for paid sexual relations, child and adolescent pornography, or using boys, girls or adolescents in sex shows in which there may, furthermore, be an economic exchange or payment of another kind for the underage person or for an intermediary third party involved in the sexual exploitation.

Commercial sexual exploitation is a gross violation of the fundamental human rights of persons under 18 years of age, as well as a form of sexual violence and economic exploitation similar to slavery and forced labour. In accordance with international conventions it is considered a criminal offence and our countries are reforming their laws in order to make it punishable by law.

**Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study consisted of approaching the issue of Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE) from a male perspective. The focus was based on the assumption that, in order to be better prepared for taking preventive action, it is important to know this group's
thoughts, opinions and assessment of the different aspects of this subject. It is worth pointing out that the intention was not to seek specific actions or behaviour related to CSE on the part of the men who participated in the study, but, rather, their perception of, or views on, the issue. The following lists the general objectives of the research:

1. To analyze the factors that determine and explain the reasons why certain men have paid sexual relations with underage persons and take part in commercial sexual exploitation.
2. To pinpoint what aspects of male sexuality manifest themselves in this type of activity.
3. To identify the “inhibiting” factors that make men abstain from this type of activity.
4. To determine men’s “tolerance levels” of paid sexual relations with persons under 18 years of age, as well as of other types of commercial sexual exploitation.
5. To offer guidelines for preventive measures for the male population with regard to this type of commercial sexual exploitation.

The subjects of the study and its methodology

The study was carried out on 445 men from a broad spectrum of the population in the seven countries covered, namely: Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, Panama and the Dominican Republic. The men were all over 18, from different socio-economic, geographic, ethnic and socio-cultural backgrounds (both from capital cities and from other regions, married, single, white-collar and blue-collar workers, heterosexuals and homosexuals).

The information was gathered using two basic techniques: a focal group and one-to-one interviews with individual subjects. It is, therefore, a qualitative type study. Data was collected by the national researchers in each country who together agreed on the general methodology and specific work procedures to be applied. Moreover, the research was based on a methodological framework with extremely strict adherence to the ethics protecting the rights of the people being studied (especially given the nature of this particular issue), whilst respecting the duties of anyone – including social researchers – dealing with commercial sexual exploitation.

CSE should be understood within the context of a system that trades in people and their relations, including their sexuality.
Main results

The research was based on a working hypothesis: sex with underage persons and CSE is directly linked to the way male sexuality is constructed and experienced within the context of the patriarchal society. We are dealing here with traditional patriarchal sexuality; one that is based on dominance and control; that centres on the genitals – i.e., is phallocentric; that is mechanized and “controlled by natural urges”; and in which great importance and prestige are attached to engaging in sex with underage persons. The latter is true despite the fact that it is a gross violation of the human rights of the underage persons. It is highly valued since it affords men status in the eyes of others; furthermore, many of the men interviewed were of the opinion that it revitalizes and rejuvenates males.

This sexuality founded on the patriarchal system perceives women or their bodies – and those under 18 – as objects which can be appropriated as such. The results of the research corroborate this aspect, in fact, since they show that, in the majority of cases, women’s bodies are compared to automobiles and their parts. The sexual preference of those interviewed does not affect views and action in this regard, since homosexual men perceive the bodies of young men or adolescents in a similar manner.

According to the men interviewed, these images, imperatives and precepts are assimilated into male sexuality through the traditional forms and mechanisms of sexual socialization (on the streets, through friends, cinema, pornography and prostitution, among others). They claim to have received very little in the way of sex education, either within the family or in educational establishments or others that are fundamental to socialization processes.

With regard to the above, underage persons and young bodies are viewed in the same light: as objects that can be appropriated or purchased. This is true both within the context of commercial sexual exploitation or outside of it. The male respondents claimed it was easier to control or manipulate young people or those underage either due to their lack of experience, their “sexual appetite” (according to the logic of many of those interviewed) or by using economic means (including payment in kind). Those interviewed professed that sex with virgins is highly valued since it combines the pleasure derived from genital contact with an “unused” woman and the prestige this holds in the eyes of others, which could be described as the “eroticization of power.” It is, regrettably, this line of thinking that justifies and leads men into abuse and the commercial sexual exploitation of underage persons.

Many of the men interviewed cite different reasons for their role as “clients” in the marketing of sexuality. Among them, those that stand out are: of a personal nature (inability to seduce or pick up women, old age or unattractiveness); those typical of male sexuality (the desire to act quickly, avoid wasting time, be in control because they are paying for sex, do what they would not do with their wife or girlfriend); those encouraged by patriarchal society in its construct of male sexuality (having sex with “other” women, among others);
In regard to commercial sexual exploitation, despite the fact that these acts are a gross violation of human rights, the research showed that there is a high level of tolerance towards sex with underage—especially post-pubescent—persons since this is considered intrinsic to man and his rights, regardless of the fact it involves violating those of the boys, girls and adolescents. The very questioning of these beliefs took some of the men by surprise.

The expression “There is no minimum age, just minimum bodies...” is a clear example of the widespread view held by the majority of these men. Added to this belief is the notion of “sexual age”, which is used to argue the case that it is physical development (as opposed to age) that makes a young person “apt” for sex, thereby disregarding basic considerations of the human rights of the underage persons, as well as their right to integral development and to be protected from sexual abuse.

Despite the fact that there are international conventions, national legislation for the protection of children and adolescents and even criminal laws defining commercial sexual exploitation activities as crimes punished by heavy prison sentences, this group’s perception of underage persons leads them—in almost all the countries surveyed—to, once again, use the justification of the comparison with automobiles: “if you can buy a new car, why shouldn’t you be able to buy a young woman or underage person?” If she is a virgin, so much the better as this ensures she has not been “used” and is in a position to be “broken in”—something that is flaunted in order to project or sustain a particular image of masculinity.

Some of the possible options of critical paths towards CSE, in conjunction with the above, range from men who engage in unpaid casual sex to those who pay for the sexual services of adults, which can eventually lead to the commercial sexual exploitation of persons under 18.
With respect to CSE, there is a widely-held view shared by most of the men interviewed for the study that there is nothing wrong with this practice despite it being a heavily penalized crime. They see themselves as clients paying for a service, regardless of the fact that, instead of a relationship between a client and a service, this is an illegal activity involving delinquents who are committing a crime. The consensus among the men interviewed was that it is a crime (in the case of “procurement”) or mental illness (“deviation”, “perversion”) only when pre-pubescent boys or girls are used in sexual activities. Despite this, they believe that sex with persons under 18 – who are not pre-pubescent – is acceptable and, if it involves payment, there is nothing wrong with it. Moreover, they think they are doing a person or a group of people in need a favour, whilst they turn a blind eye to the terrible physical, psychological and emotional consequences experienced by all underage persons subjected to this form of slavery. In the researchers’ opinion, this rationale is in line with that of paid sex with adults (or prostitution), in general.

As part of the study, research was carried out on elements or aspects that inhibited the use of underage persons in paid sexual relations, and that could be used in prevention campaigns. Some of those referred to in the study are, for example, the idea that others could do the same to their daughters or the very real possibility of spending years in prison for engaging in this type of sexual relations (CSE as a crime, in an abstract sense, has little effect). There is very little reference to religious values or those of any other kind. In a patriarchal context, CSE is considered neither a criminal offence nor a sin, but, rather, an attribute of male sexuality and even a desirable or admirable act.

The specific term “Commercial Sexual Exploitation” does not mean anything to most of the men interviewed; they consider it an empty or abstract concept that, for many of them, could even have completely different connotations from those intended. Their overall view is that “if it is paid for, it is not exploitation”, and they associate CSE with labour issues rather than crime; or with more extreme forms of sexual violence.

**Recommendations for the prevention of Commercial Sexual Exploitation within the male population**

These can be divided into short-term, and mid and long-term recommendations, including the following:

- Move beyond the psychologistic approach to CSE. The sexual deviation tendency of men involved in CSE (as “clients”) is not the most significant underlying explanation. The fact that some men have this tendency does not mean it can be applied to all of them (in fact, men who engage in paedophilia or pederasty have a preference for sex with pre-pubescent girls or boys).

- Organize mass campaigns aimed specifically at the male population in general, and designed in keeping with the male discourse and their actions. This requires finding an alternative term for “CSE” that men will identify with, and that, ideally, has connotations
that are not ambiguous. Campaigns that are based solely on the lack of respect for the human rights of underage persons do not, in themselves, make enough of an impact on the majority of men’s individual and collective subjectivity.

- The campaigns should be clear, direct and explicit in explaining that CSE is a heavily penalized criminal offence resulting in years of imprisonment. Appealing to the men’s conscience or goodwill does not appear to be a good recipe for success. It is suggested that the campaigns address a broad spectrum of the male population.

- A systematic and sustainable Sex Education programme aimed at the male population in general is urgently needed in our countries to ensure an alternative model of male sexuality is established, in which other people must be treated as such and not merely as tools to be used at men’s whim. This proposal for sex education with a human rights approach should increase the general public’s awareness of the negative repercussions of the way men are taught to experience their sexuality.

One of the main justifications men use for their preference for sexual relations with persons under 18 – which helps to promote sexual exploitation – is the fantasy that it will rejuvenate them.
This study entitled Commercial Sexual Exploitation and Masculinity contains information on the knowledge and perception of men from Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama and the Dominican Republic regarding the commercial sexual exploitation of underage persons. It provides input for designing and implementing strategies for the prevention of this social ill.

The ILO considers commercial sexual exploitation a gross violation of the human rights of persons under 18 and a form of exploitation similar to slavery and forced labour which, in addition, means that those who use boys, girls and adolescents in the sex trade are committing a criminal offence.