

MEDIA RELEASE

Old and new threats of child sexual exploitation in South Asia

EMBARGO - 00:00, 16 MARCH 2018, Bangkok, Thailand – ‘Ancient’ and new forms of sexual exploitation that exist ‘side-by-side’ are putting the children of South Asia at risk says a new report.

[Research](#) released this week by ECPAT International claims that the sub-continent has long been a place where the sexual exploitation of children is a serious concern, with early and forced marriage, and the trafficking of children for sexual purposes established norms in many societies. However, the report says that today, children are more prone to be victimized in both the “old and the new worlds evolving side by side.”

“All across South Asia, we have ancient brothels that have always been filled with trafficked girls,” says Rajib Haldar, ECPAT Regional Coordinator for South Asia. “What is new however, is that today these may co-exist with online child sexual exploitation, or even be contributing to this trade by promoting live streaming. At the same time, the old practice of sexually exploiting out-of-school child workers is happening today alongside the cyber bullying of school pupils. In South Asia, sexually abused child brides can live next-door to university educated girls being sexually exploited through social media.”

The report says that the online sexual exploitation of children is one of the most worrying trends in the region, and there are two kinds of online risks that are increasing for children. “On one hand, we see child sexual abuse material created, and exchanged both regionally and globally,” says Haldar. “On the other hand, we see sexual harassment and extortion of children online, mainly affecting girls. In these cases, the perpetrators are generally known to the victims, often peers or adults in the circle of trust. Sexualized images are often shared publicly on social media, and have been moving from more static platforms such as Facebook, to faster moving, more private apps such as WhatsApp, WeChat or Snapchat.”

In South Asia young people are at the forefront of Internet use. For example, in Sri Lanka, more than half of young people are online; in Bangladesh, about 85 percent of the country’s 85 million Internet users are youth; in Pakistan close to half of under 18s spend more than five hours a day online; and India has one of the highest numbers of smart phone users among young people on the planet.

“South Asian young people are gaining access to the Internet at a rapid rate via mobile phones,” says Haldar. “Free Wi-Fi hotspots often act as magnets connecting children. While this is mostly positive, it has a dark side that is increasing the risk of traditional forms of exploitation and abuse.”

The ECPAT research also points a finger at the region’s burgeoning tourism industry, warning that South Asian countries need to move quickly to better understand and counter the threat posed to children through this sector. An adverse impact of the expansion of the travel and tourism sector in South Asia is the increased threat that travelling child sex offenders pose to children. And it is not only foreigners that are a danger. Cases of domestic travelling sex offenders are also on the rise.

“South Asia needs to quickly realize that the multiplication of travel options and vacation packages may imply increasing threats for children also by local travelling child sex offenders,” says the report. “While traditional destinations for foreign child sex offenders, such as those in neighbouring Southeast Asian countries, begin to tighten up legal frameworks and create child protection mechanisms, South Asia is just beginning to acknowledge and address the sexual exploitation of children through travel and tourism.”

Although solid data is not available, previous ECPAT research suggests that the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism has been moving beyond traditional tourist locations and has started emerging in most of the countries in the region, especially India and Nepal.

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Notes to editors

Read the full report [here](#):

Other key messages/possible leads from the study

Sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism:

- As of 2015, nearly 18.3 million international tourists visited the South Asia region. By 2030, this number is expected to reach 36 million;
- The sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism is typically interlinked with poverty and inequality, social and cultural disparities, limited education and livelihood opportunities, and matched with weak child protection systems; and

- Sri Lanka may be regarded as an exception in the region, with a longer history of tackling foreign child sex offenders, and positive efforts to combat the problem.

Online sexual exploitation of children:

- Poor children who have been historically, primary targets of sexual exploitation as a result of economic pressure may continue to be exposed to sexual violence in its new forms;
- More affluent children who may have been protected from street-type sexual harassment, are now potentially exposed to consumption and production of child sexual abuse material online; and
- The online and offline environments cannot be separated. Child sexual exploitation may start online and continue offline – or vice versa.

General:

- The Global Slavery Index 2016 estimated that the top five countries ranking globally for modern slavery are concentrated in Asia: India, China, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Uzbekistan;
- India has more than 18.3 million people estimated to be trapped in bonded labour, domestic service, forced begging, sexual exploitation and forced marriage. Bangladesh is home to more than 1.5 million people subjected to forced prostitution, forced marriage, forced labour and organ trafficking;
- In South Asia, sexual abuse and exploitation may be ignored in situations where the priority is to protect family honour. As a result, reporting of sexual abuse and exploitation tends to be low since it potentially damages the girl, rather than the perpetrator. For example, in Bhutan, only 10 percent of children were found to share their experiences of sexual violence and harassment, and primarily with peers. And in Afghanistan, girl victims of sexual abuse may be re-victimised through honour killings or forced marriage to their rapist; and
- Families often deny the sexual abuse of boys. Such cultural attitudes may partly explain why the sexual abuse of boys is heavily underreported.

A word about words

The sexual exploitation of children is a heinous crime in all its forms. Careful and precise choice of language can help us to better understand the problem; help victims to contextualize and come to terms with what has happened to them; and help governments to prioritize issues and shape responses. When describing the sexual exploitation of children, irresponsible or ill-informed use of terminology can trivialize or sensationalize the issue, stigmatize victims and make it more difficult to raise awareness.

For example, the unqualified use of the terms “pornography” and “prostitution” should only occur when describing adult activities. Using these terms in relation to the sexual abuse of children can lend a sense of normalcy and legitimacy to offending by implying that the child has transactional agency or has provided some degree of consent. Children can never provide informed consent to sexual activity with an adult. For these reasons:

- Avoid “child pornography.” It is better to use the term “(online) child sexual abuse material,” or “online child sexual exploitation”;
- Avoid “child prostitute.” It is better to use the term “child trafficked for sexual purposes,” or “child exploited through/in/for prostitution”;
- Avoid “child sex tourism,” it is better to use the term “sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism”; and
- Avoid “child sex tourist,” it is better to use the term “traveling child sex offender” or “transnational child sex offender.”

Never use terms that trivialize the sexual assault of children, such as “kiddie porn,” “child porn,” “kiddie fiddler,” “nonce,” or “pedo.” (Note that a paedophile is a person with a specific mental health disorder who has a sustained sexual interest in pre-pubescent children. Not all child sex offenders have a paedophilic disorder and not all those with a paedophilic disorder are child sex offenders.)

For more information, consult the [Terminology Guidelines for the Protection of Children from Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse](#).

About ECPAT

ECPAT International is a global network of organisations dedicated to ending the sexual exploitation of children. With 103 members in 93 countries, ECPAT focuses on the trafficking of children for sexual purposes; online child sexual exploitation; and the sexual exploitation of children in the travel and tourism sector. The ECPAT International Secretariat is based in Bangkok Thailand.

For more information about ECPAT, go to www.ecpat.org



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