



Child Sex Tourism: A Violation of Children's Rights

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Child sex tourism, or the extraterritorial sexual exploitation of male or female children while traveling abroad, affects over two million children worldwide (DOJ, 2014; O'Connell Davidson, 2001). This longstanding practice is prevalent on six continents. Children in low income countries, such as Thailand, Cambodia, Costa Rica, Mexico, and Brazil, among others, are usually targets for child sex tourism due to the perpetrators' desire to seek ethnically diverse victims; an exchange rate that favors the perpetrator's currency; and certain countries have weak prosecutorial laws that enable the perpetrator to evade legal accountability (ECPAT, 2008; Rivers-Moore, 2011). Most perpetrators are Western, with one-fourth being American. It is estimated that the US profits \$20 billion annually from tourist companies that illicitly organize international sex tourism packages (Panko & George, 2012).

Child sex tourism is one of the most detrimental threats to the mental and physical health of youth. Most violated children experience post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, suicide attempts, low self-esteem, and eating disorders, among other consequences (ECPAT, 2008). Children as young as six years old have contracted sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS; have endured severe physical abuse; have had pregnancy-related illnesses; and can experience developmental delays (George & Panko, 2011; Menaker & Franklin, 2013). Other consequences of child sex tourism include a child's lack of education, poor nutrition, and social isolation as well as participation in criminal activity and/or substance abuse (Menaker & Franklin, 2013).

Child sex tourism has been named a global priority by organizations such as the End Child Prostitution Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT) and the World Tourism Organization (WTO) of the UN (UNWTO, 2014). Initiatives such as "Offenders Beware" and the "Child Sex Tourism Prevention Project" attempt to raise awareness about this issue, both in the US and in "destination countries" (Montgomery, 2008). Yet, children continue to be sexually exploited on a daily basis.

Global efforts to combat legal shortcomings are implemented by the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. This body of experts is dedicated to help meet the basic needs and rights of children; hold countries accountable to their commitment to protect their children's rights; protect children from sexual exploitation beyond jurisdictional limits; hold perpetrators accountable for crimes committed abroad; and initiate prosecution in the perpetrator's country of origin (UNWTO, 2014). In the US, the United States'

Prosecutorial Remedies and Other Tools to End the Exploitation of Children Today (PROTECT) Act of 2003 (n.d.) mandates the US government to uphold its commitment to extraterritorial jurisdiction for child sex tourism cases. Most countries have not taken such measures, which is a major hurdle in combatting child sex tourism.

In order to effectively protect children from global sexual exploitation, it is necessary to develop multifaceted and comprehensive international laws. This task can be accomplished in collaboration with local government leaders, legal experts, child or developmental psychologists, and NGOs. Furthermore, international laws must take a two-pronged approach to stop child sex tourism: (1) increase perpetrator detection and enforce perpetrator prosecution and (2) establish victim-based interventions that are age-appropriate and culturally sensitive.

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