

A light at the end of the street

Young people themselves are the solution to the growing problem of child prostitution, says street worker STEPHANIE SAUVÉ

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Images of Third World child prostitutes often feel comfortably far from home. But Canada is not exempt. Child prostitution thrives in a world that grossly underestimates its prevalence and fully misunderstands its catalysts. Studies suggest that 70 to 80 per cent of those involved in the Canadian sex industry began as children.

Recent media stories have shone a spotlight on the rising numbers of young Canadian sex workers. In Montreal, Jacques Moise, a youth worker for PIAMP (Project d'intervention auprès des mineurs), works with child prostitutes as young as 12; he has seen children become prostitutes for reasons ranging from financial need to outright rebellion. He listens to these children's stories to better understand their needs. He helps them acquire knowledge and decision-making skills to protect themselves. But his approach is rare.

The common response to these children, in Canada and abroad, is to deny their existence or legislate them out of public view. In doing so, we expose them to worse forms of abuse and to the risk of sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS. And we fail to condemn the societal issues that sustain their sex work.

My own biases about child prostitutes were first challenged in Zambia where I worked on a micro-credit project. Our Zambian partners explained that program participants were children working in the street, so they could buy food their parents could not afford and pay for younger siblings' school fees. Not providing for their family was more shameful than how they found the money to do so. Many of the girls had children of their own; one told me of how, before she began working as a prostitute, she had trouble rinsing out her baby's diapers because she could only afford soap once a week. Proudly, she explained that now things were different.

Without better options, children will work in the sex trade to meet their own or their families' basic needs. When our program offered business skills and a loan to start a small business, these children saw a safer opportunity and took it. They started successful businesses such as tailoring and miscellaneous retail activities. Youth workers provided support as the children earned a profit and learned to budget into the future.

But if urgent family needs arose, we all knew they'd go back to the sex trade for fast cash. Information on the risks of sex work and reproductive health information only became practical once we understood their situation and supported their economic goals. Working in Africa and across Southeast Asia, I saw cross-cultural similarities among child prostitutes, and I saw four key strategies prove globally effective. They make sense for Canada too.

First, let's recognize the connection between actions and needs: Street kids often prostitute themselves because they need the money, or because they seek praise or affection they can't get anywhere else. Let's listen to their motivations and avoid premature moral judgments.

Second: We should empowering these young people with information, knowledge and skills so they can protect themselves from harm and take back control of their young bodies.

Third, we can improve health and safety services -- basic supports such as medical care, legal aid, food and job coaching. By connecting children to such services and opportunities, we strengthen their ability to move off the street.

Fourth, we can strengthen them by providing dependable relationships. Many of these children know few adults they can trust. Outreach programs require well-trained staff and consistent funding so that a relationship between a child and a youth worker can be sustained over time as the child grows.

Programs built around these principles exist around the world, but there are too few of them. In many countries, governments are unwilling to openly acknowledge that children are engaged in the sex trade because that means admitting to major failings in social and economic policy. It's simpler to stigmatize the children as rebellious, criminal and immoral.

Even when governments do act, they often prefer programs controlled by adults and largely limited to helping only very young children. Across the globe, older children and teenagers involved in the sex trade are ignored.

But Canada and the world must not turn away: Children aged 12 to 18, resilient and determined in their journey to adulthood, need the world's support. Mr. Moise once told me that much of his work in Montreal comes from word of mouth. When young sex workers feel respected, heard and supported, they bring along their friends.

The Canadian government must apply this same open, forthright approach when responding to growing numbers of child prostitutes in our inner cities. Overdue investment of government resources would make a big difference. And let's extend this approach to our international development efforts. Funds, such as NEPAD's \$50-million toward preventing HIV/AIDS in Africa, must support realistic solutions for young people.

For now, the silence of embarrassed adults is deafening.
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