

Global Concern for Children's Rights: The World Congress Against Sexual Exploitation

By Karen Mahler

Concern about exploitative sexual practices involving children and adolescents has been rising over the past several years. The media have increased awareness by documenting instances of young women and girls being sold into prostitution or sexual slavery, coerced into child pornography or trafficked across borders into bonded sexual labor.¹ The growing perception of these age-old problems as examples of serious human rights abuses culminated in the August 1996 meeting in Stockholm, Sweden, of the World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, the first global conference convened specifically to address this issue.

First proposed in 1994 by End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT), a Thailand-based nongovernmental organization, the Congress grew from a collaboration between ECPAT, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) and nongovernmental organizations supporting the Convention on the Rights of the Child. With participants from 119 countries, the Congress sought to raise awareness about the global nature of the problem of sexual exploitation of children (defined as all persons under the age of 18) and mobilize international action.² It resulted in the unanimous adoption by all Congress attendees of the Agenda for Action, a document stipulating concrete measures to foster global cooperation and facilitate the prevention of sexual abuses and the protection of vulnerable youth.³

A number of distinct practices constitute sexually exploitative phenomena. Pedophilia, the selection of a young child as one's preferred object of sexual desire, as well as the production of pornographic materials featuring young children, affect

both boys and girls, and are viewed in most societies as deviant. In addition, there are children and adolescents of both sexes who, for any number of reasons, find themselves lacking financial support, and who, therefore, trade sexual "favors" in exchange for food, shelter or other necessities, in much the same way as do their adult counterparts.

But the practices that appear to have an impact on the largest number of young people, and which are of greatest concern to the international human rights community, are those that involve the exploitation of girls and adolescent women who are "given" in marriage or who are expected to produce income for their families through sexual labor. It is these practices, most common in the developing world, in which socially acceptable traditions merge with outright sexual exploitation, that bring to light the concerns of the "girl child." The immediate success of the World Congress has been to focus international attention on the plight of these exploited young people and to highlight these issues in the context of children's human rights.

Despite the worldwide attention being focused on the issue of sexual exploitation of children, little reliable, methodologically sound research documents its prevalence.⁴ Indeed, the figures cited by governments, nongovernmental organizations and the media are typically "guesstimates" that through frequent repetition have attained the status of fact.⁵ Regardless of the actual numbers involved, however, the work of the Congress represents a dedicated attempt to grapple with a problem that is defined not by its scale, but rather by "its degree of seriousness as a violation of fundamental [human] rights."⁶

The Congress was guided in large part by the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the international human rights treaty adopted by the United Nations in

1989 and currently ratified by 187 nations.⁷ Among its many enumerated rights, the convention states that children have the right to be protected from economic and sexual exploitation, and stipulates that individual nations have the obligation to "take all appropriate legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect...child[ren] from all forms of...abuse."⁸ While the Convention on the Rights of the Child is the first international treaty to specifically address the human rights of children, it joins a long list of international legal instruments addressing sexual exploitation and the related issues of trafficking, forced labor, slavery-like practices and discrimination.^{9*}

Despite such declarations, the sexual exploitation of children appears to be a worldwide phenomenon. News reports documenting the trafficking of young women from Eastern European countries to the West,¹⁰ the murder of several girls—allegedly at the hands of child pornographers—in Belgium¹¹ and the hiring of child prostitutes by United Nations peacekeeping troops in Mozambique¹² highlight the truly global nature of the problem. These events also attest to the fact that involvement in abusive practices is not limited to either the developed or developing world. The root causes, however, appear to be embedded within the broader socioeconomic and cultural issues facing the developing world, where by all accounts the problem is most widespread and the greatest number of young people are affected.

*Relevant United Nations treaties currently in force include the 1949 Convention for the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation and Prostitution of Others; the 1956 Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery; and the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. In addition, two International Labor Organization conventions (numbers 29 and 105) set labor standards and restrict the practice of forced labor (see: reference 7).

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The Roots of the Problem

The literature on the sexual exploitation of children catalogues a host of economic, social and cultural factors believed to underlie the phenomenon. A review of these materials, along with discussions with conference participants and child rights advocates, suggests that no single scenario adequately explains the many forms of exploitation that arise in different world regions. In the developing world, poverty and economic disparity appear to be associated with exploitative conditions such as child labor and trafficking networks, but the significance of poverty is strongly mediated by discriminatory attitudes and traditional practices that may be unique to specific cultures.

Gender Discrimination and Inequality

Discrimination against women and girls and the inequalities they face are chronicled in global statistics documenting the limits placed on women's access to education and financial assets, their lack of power and influence regarding personal decision-making, and the existence of discriminatory practices associated with male preference and traditional attitudes in many societies.¹³ The devaluation of girls and women and their inferior social status has been repeatedly linked to the development of a climate that encourages and sustains their sexual mistreatment.¹⁴ Since these attitudes are culturally linked, their manifestation differs regionally. Although empirical research is sorely lacking in this area, several studies and numerous journalistic accounts describe the relationship between sexual exploitation and practices that are attributed to gender discrimination.

The sexual mores that set the stage for abuse are probably documented best in Thai culture. Visits to prostitutes among Thai men are common and unexceptional occurrences.¹⁵ Cultural attitudes encouraging sexual experience among men while valuing chastity in women create a demand for the services of prostitutes; indeed, 65% of rural Thai men younger than 20 have visited a prostitute, while nearly 80% of extramarital sexual contacts among urban Thai men are with commercial sex workers.¹⁶

But cultural attitudes in Thailand also account for a ready supply of young women. Thai family norms dictate that daughters take substantial responsibility for their family's economic well-being. In rural communities, where there are few opportunities for young women to earn the necessary income, the attraction of commercial sex work and its promise of

high wages is strong. In one of the few available quantitative documentations of commercial sex workers, 44–55% of Thai prostitutes indicated that their main reason for entry into prostitution was their parents' financial need. Some 23–43% of sex workers indicated that their first sexual experience was a commercial encounter; indeed, several workers reported that they or their families had received a substantial fee in exchange for the loss of their virginity at a very young age.¹⁷

According to another study examining migration and commercial sex in Thailand, more than 80% of prostitutes remitted a portion of their earnings to their families, most often to their parents. Remittances were quite sizable, often enabling rural families to achieve a standard of living far above what they could expect if their daughters worked in the formal sector.¹⁸

Early marriage is another practice rooted in gender discrimination that can be an avenue for sexual exploitation. Since legal limits on age at marriage typically apply only to unions sought without parental consent, marriages arranged by parents (and often accompanied by financial transfers such as the paying of a bridal dowry) can involve girls well below a country's legal minimum.¹⁹ Rates of teenage marriage continue to be quite high throughout Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia,²⁰ in Bangladesh, for example, the median age at first marriage for women aged 20–24 is 15.²¹

The tendency for higher rates of marital dissolution when women marry at a young age may itself result in abuse; it may leave a young woman with few viable avenues of economic support other than commercial sex work. Among Ethiopian women, for example, early age at first marriage was found to be a significant predictor of commercial sex work: In a sample of more than 2,000 women, 42% of women working as prostitutes had married before the age of 13, while 9% of women still in their first marriage had done so.²²

Migration and Trafficking

The sexual exploitation of children and adolescent women is also related to labor migration and trafficking networks that develop as an outgrowth of political and economic change. The use of these channels is fueled by poverty, set against a backdrop of economic disparity, discrimination and the often willful disregard by government officials of human rights and the rule of law.

In several reports on the trafficking of girls and young women as sexual commodities across Asian routes, Human

Rights Watch has documented the political and economic forces that encourage both the supply and demand side of this trade.²³ These reports catalog the unscrupulous behavior of traffickers who capitalize on the poverty and desperation of families living in remote villages with the promise of employment for their children in foreign cities. Impoverished parents confronted with a dearth of local financial opportunity, and enticed by reports of the bounty that awaits in booming urban economies, part with their children in exchange for a fee and a promise that they will be provided with gainful employment. These reports also document the corruption among officials in law enforcement, immigration and the judicial system, who profit from the illegal sex trade and thus have little motivation to enforce the laws.

The World Congress helped bring to public attention the plight of young people caught up in these illicit networks. However, Therese Caoutte, a consultant for Human Rights Watch and author of its report on the trafficking of Burmese women and girls into Thailand, stresses that by focusing on child victims and coercion, Congress attendees avoided grappling with larger issues such as the harsh conditions confronting women, even those who choose commercial sex work: "Even if the women are 18 or 19 and did agree to go, so what? They are still working in brothels surrounded by barbed wire, with debt books and filthy living conditions. The idea of choice really has to be developed; these women may have chosen prostitution, but they didn't chose slavery."²⁴

Moreover, the trafficking of girls and young women across international borders is not only a vehicle for sexual abuse, but one shared by many industries that profit from cheap, readily exploited sources of labor.²⁵ Female workers who are trafficked to foreign soil have no legal status and are often treated as criminals. Unable to speak the native language, and typically with few skills, they can be readily controlled by traffickers and their employers. If they are able to escape, they may face arrest and prosecution at the hands of local immigration officials.²⁶

But more mundane circumstances also create exploitative conditions for girls and young women. The search for employment opportunities among people in impoverished rural communities also leads to voluntary labor migration to urban areas, frequently within a nation's borders. Commercial centers such as Bangkok (where the U.S. military presence in the 1950s, and in later years, the development

of the tourist industry, have been implicated in the growth of prostitution²⁷) are frequent destinations for young women from rural areas.²⁸

Indeed, in Thailand, migration networks provide a steady flow of adolescents and young women from villages in the northern and northeastern regions for commercial sex work in Bangkok and areas in Southeast Asia. One study, for example, demonstrated how firmly established certain migration routes were as pathways into commercial sex work: Forty-eight percent of the women who had migrated from one northern Thai village were found to be working as prostitutes in their current place of residence.²⁹ Among nearly 700 prostitutes working in Thai urban centers, 95% originated from northern regions, and 42% percent were 17 or younger when they first entered prostitution.³⁰

Trafficking and migration leading to prostitution and other forms of sexual abuse appear to coincide with a pattern of rapid urban growth and the concomitant deterioration in rural productivity, which creates large gaps in wealth and opportunity between urban and rural communities.³¹ However, many nations face the challenges of economic disparity without developing the types of entrenched exploitative networks that have been documented in countries such as Thailand and Nepal. What these countries additionally share with other countries where the sexual mistreatment of girls and young women is an increasing concern are ingrained cultural attitudes that tend to devalue women and girls, and exclude them from opportunities to pursue material gain through nonexploitative means.

Child Labor

Reports released in late 1996 by UNICEF and the International Labor Organization (ILO) draw attention to child prostitution as "one of the most intolerable forms of child labor."³² In its most extreme manifestation, children are forced into sexual work through the practice of debt bondage, wherein a young girl's labor in a brothel is promised by an impoverished family for an unspecified amount of time in exchange for cash or credit. While the arrangement is allegedly intended to last only until the debt is paid, repayment is frequently impossible, given the typically limited earning potential of debtors and the illicit and often deceptive practices of lenders (such as excessively high interest rates and additional charges and fines for work-related expenses).³³

The sexual mistreatment of young peo-

ple is also associated with other types of exploitative child labor that are not directly sexual in nature. Domestic service, for example, typically takes young girls from impoverished families to distant homes where they are likely to work long hours under harsh conditions, isolated from their families and with little or no pay.³⁴ Aside from the blatant abuse of such slavery-like conditions, these children are also often vulnerable to physical and sexual abuse.

Work in the tourism and catering industries is often an entry point to commercial sexual activity for children and adolescents. According to ILO studies of tourist communities in Kenya, Mexico, the Philippines and Sri Lanka, girls and young women who fill jobs as waitresses, "bar girls" or receptionists in tourist establishments are frequently exposed to enticements to enhance their income through providing sexual services.³⁵

The recently released ILO report stresses that young children (those younger than 15) are rarely involved in commercial sex-based work, and it emphasizes that when advocates focus on the sexual exploitation of children, they may neglect the many nonsexual abuses and risks that young people face when poverty, lack of adequate parental support and a dearth of alternate opportunities bring them to occupy the most marginal jobs along the economic fringes of society.³⁶ Nonetheless, it is along these fringes where children are apt to engage in work that is shielded from legislation regulating wages, hours of employment and safety conditions, and where they are most likely to fall prey to sexual exploitation.³⁷

Under the guiding principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, many international human rights and children's rights organizations have called for the elimination of all forms of child labor and for universal access to education.³⁸ However, efforts to enhance children's lives through the elimination of child labor can have the paradoxical effect of removing children from economically necessary work, thereby compelling youngsters to work in the highly exploitative street economy.³⁹

For example, in 1992, the Child Labor Deterrence Act was introduced in the U.S. Congress. The bill's purpose was to ban the importation into the United States of goods made by children younger than 15. The unanticipated response in Bangladesh was dramatic: Tens of thousands of children employed in Bangladesh's vast, export-oriented garment industry were immediately dismissed from their jobs. With few

skills and limited access to education or to other legitimate sources of income, many of these children ended up in the streets, working as prostitutes or involved in other, equally dangerous forms of labor.⁴⁰

After this situation was discovered by UNICEF and local nongovernmental organizations, the Bangladesh Garment Manufacturers and Exporters Association subsequently negotiated and signed a Memorandum of Understanding with UNICEF and the ILO to assure that school placements would be arranged for terminated child workers and that children would receive stipends to offset their lost wages. In addition, the agreement stipulated that the factory positions of terminated child workers be offered to other qualified adult family members. The agreement was to be implemented with funds contributed by the three organizations.⁴¹ To date, there has been little follow-up from which to judge the success of the agreement. Nonetheless, the situation demonstrates how well-intentioned but short-sighted interventions in child labor may increase vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

The Work of the Congress

In his final report on the World Congress, United Nations General Rapporteur Vitat Muntarhorn reiterated the conference's central tenet that the commercial sexual exploitation of children represents a "massive violation" of their human rights, and that its eradication will require sustained efforts at prevention, social mobilization, education, criminalization and law enforcement and the allocation of sufficient resources to accomplish these objectives.⁴² The unanimous adoption of the Congress' Agenda for Action sends a strong message of international commitment to these aims.

Areas of Agreement...

In the spirit of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the World Congress Agenda for Action makes the best interests of children its focus. This is reflected in the Agenda's stipulation that children themselves be actively represented in the development and implementation of programs concerning their welfare, and in the document's emphasis on protection and on recovery procedures (e.g., the reintegration of the victim into the community) that are sensitive to the specific needs of young victims.

The document stresses the necessity for coordination and cooperation among local, national, regional and international bodies in developing strategies and implementing mechanisms to monitor progress

and encourage compliance with the mandates of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (including timely reporting to the monitoring Committee) and other international human rights instruments. Moreover, prevention of sexual exploitation is emphasized through educational efforts, particularly those that improve access to schools, strengthen family ties and dissuade communities from continuing discriminatory practices that leave girls (and sometimes boys) vulnerable.

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The Agenda for Action, however, is a nonbinding agreement; despite its being, according to Muntarhorn "tantamount to a commitment from the global community,"⁴³ its potential, like that of many international conventions, lies more in its capacity to provide moral suasion than in its power to mete out legal sanctions. Moral authority, though, can be tremendously powerful as an instrument of change. As Dorian Beyer, general counsel for the National Child Labor Committee, notes, the declaration of the Congress signals that "the world has decided that sexual exploitation of children is an outrage."⁴⁴ For a state to demonstrate disinterest through inaction in the face of such a statement would be to risk becoming a pariah in the international community.

Conference attendees and other child rights advocates agreed one of the most important outcomes of the conference was its focusing international attention on and raising public awareness about the serious and global nature of the problem. Another frequently mentioned comment, however, was that the Congress highlighted the paucity of reliable data about the prevalence of sexual exploitation and the circumstances in which it occurs. This is a particularly troubling issue, given that the Agenda for Action sets the year 2000 as a goal by which there will be documented progress in "reducing the number of children vulnerable" to these abuses.⁴⁵ In the past, nongovernmental organizations have had difficulty obtaining funding for projects designed to gather baseline data or evaluate program success. Now, in the wake of the Congress and the agreements obtained from more than 100 governments worldwide, advocates hope that donors will be more willing to fund such projects.⁴⁶

...And Controversy

The subject of age has consistently been one of the most contentious issues in the field of child rights, and it proved to be a subject of formidable controversy at the World Congress as well. Indeed, according to one conference attendee, it was "one of the most avoided issues" at the meeting; it was so controversial, in fact, that it was not even placed on the conference agenda.⁴⁷

The Convention on the Rights of the Child defines a child as any individual under the age of 18, unless national law stipulates a younger age of majority. In fact, the legal age designated by national laws for marriage and for consent to sexual relations is often lower. Throughout

Central and South America, for example, the legal age for marriage among females is typically 16 or younger. (In Ecuador and Paraguay, it is 12.) Throughout Asia and Africa, where 18 is the most common legal age of marriage, the legal age of consent for sexual relations may be as young as 12.⁴⁸ These age differences become obstacles to the prevention of sexual abuse against children, since in some countries legal protection for children is dependent upon an individual country's legal age of consent.⁴⁹

The conflict around age and consent to sexual relationships emerges from a debate similar to that surrounding many other human rights documents: How can a set of rights considered universal be reconciled with the prevailing mores of specific cultures? While certain practices involving children might be universally recognized as exploitative, others—such as marriage during early adolescence—may be considered normative in certain localities. Moreover, puberty and its relationship to a person's readiness to enter sexual relationships is based as much in culture as in biology. Pursuing the "best interests of the child" will likely take different forms, depending on the accepted values in a particular culture.

Nonetheless, cultural arguments cannot excuse human rights abuses. As Muntarhorn asserts in his final Congress report, when it comes to sexual exploitation "the issue of consent...is irrelevant....[S]exual exploitation is a suppression of choice, [an] eradication of free will and [a] decimation of self-determination."⁵⁰

Action and Change

Congress participants stressed the critical importance of the legal system in the prevention of child exploitation. Most coun-

tries where such abuses are a concern are in fact signatories to international conventions addressing the rights of women and children, and are thus obligated to fulfill the mandates of those instruments. Nonetheless, many countries do not have national laws specifically addressing the sexual exploitation of children, while in others, laws exist, but enforcement is lax.

Consequently, the Congress' Agenda for Action stresses the development and enforcement of laws to specifically prohibit the commercial sexual exploitation of children, to penalize those responsible for exploitation at every level of their involvement and to protect exploited children from being further victimized through improper or insensitive law enforcement.

It is unclear to what extent Congress attendees are following up on commitments made at the meeting. According to Marsha Liss, an attorney at the Child Exploitation and Obscenity Section of the U.S. Department of Justice and a member of the U.S. delegation to the World Congress, it is impossible to know at this point whether legislative change is underway; the process of drafting and submitting legislation is an extremely slow and, in many developing countries, idiosyncratic process. Furthermore, there is no single body charged with tracking progress on an international basis.⁵¹

However, many developed countries are now recognizing the role their citizens play in exacerbating demand for child sexual exploitation, by passing legislation that allows for the prosecution of citizens who engage in sex crimes while traveling abroad, even if their actions are legal in the country of destination.⁵² The Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, passed by the U.S. Congress, established such extraterritorial laws, and the governments of Australia, Belgium, France, Germany and New Zealand have recently done so as well. Canada, Ireland, Italy and the United Kingdom are currently considering similar legislation.⁵³

The Congress emphasized the need for cooperation between governments, nongovernmental organizations and international bodies to help mobilize change and sustain the efforts of individual states. Often, however, change at the local level may require not only the persistent work of concerned individuals, but may depend upon pressures exerted by shifts in global economic realities.

Thailand is a case in point, notes Jim Vermillion, democracy and government policy advisor for the U.S. Agency for In-

ternational Development (USAID). While Thailand has long been renowned for its lax attitude toward the commercial sex trade, in the past year and a half the government has raised the legal age of consent and improved its efforts at enforcing laws against prostitution. According to Vermillion, the Thai government is now taking the issue of sexual exploitation seriously, as it becomes increasingly interested in attracting foreign investment, and therefore, increasingly concerned about its "national persona."⁵⁴

Indeed, as developing countries vie for trading partners and investment dollars, the establishment of an accountable legal system based upon human rights principles becomes an important objective. To this end, USAID and the U.S. Department of Justice are working in tandem with nongovernmental organizations and ministries of justice in many countries to enhance the functioning of law enforcement and judicial institutions. USAID's rule of law initiative, for example, provides technical assistance to host countries for police training and court reform, in an attempt to establish adherence to the tenets of due process.

In recognition of the complex relationship between child exploitation and socioeconomic development, one international nongovernmental organization, the World Federation for Mental Health, circulated a resolution at the Congress requesting that the World Bank incorporate into its loan agreements impact studies to determine the consequences to children of Bank-funded projects. The resolution also calls for the Bank to establish loan criteria that specifically address practices relevant to trafficking and child prostitution. The Bank has not agreed to the resolution, but the Federation continues its lobbying efforts. At a working group meeting hosted by the U.S. delegation as a follow-up to the Congress,⁵⁵ some advocates suggested that the Bank's position indicated a lack of interest in the issue of child exploitation, while a State Department economist observed that in general the World Bank does not stipulate government action when setting up loan agreements.

However, the World Bank does take the position that investing in girls and women is "not only a matter of social justice, it is also a matter of good economics"⁵⁶ Accordingly, the Bank has attempted to integrate a gender-sensitive approach into its lending activities. While the institution continues to hone its system for rating the strength of the gender component of its programs, it has established a screening

process to determine the impact of project implementation on women.

Moreover, in several of its loans for basic education, funds are designated specifically to address the educational needs of girls. For example, the Second Primary Education Project in India selects districts for funding on the basis of low rates of female literacy, while the Primary Education Project in Malawi makes girls' school-enrollment ratio a site-selection criterion, in an effort to increase the number of schools built in areas with low rates of female attendance.⁵⁷

Some advocates voice concern that despite the importance of the conference's achievements, focusing world attention on the dramatic predicaments of sexually exploited children may obscure some larger and more fundamental issues. They argue that the true challenge lies in mobilizing global action to address the less sensational but more pervasive forms of abuse that can transform the daily lives of women and children worldwide.

In this vein, several organizations have also targeted migration and the trafficking of women and children as a focus for intervention. In conferences specifically devoted to the issue of trafficking, nongovernmental organizations such as the Asia Foundation and the Global Fund for Women have attempted to encourage continued recognition of trafficking as a human rights abuse and to develop networks through which women and girls can find assistance and be returned safely to their homes.⁵⁸ For example, besides advocating for union reforms among importing and exporting countries and encouraging governments to provide migrants with legal protection, the Asian-American Free Labor Institute furnishes migrant workers with information about their rights and the resources available to them on foreign soil.⁵⁹

In addition, the United Nations Population Fund recently signed an agreement with the International Organization for Migration (an intergovernmental body) to enhance cooperation and increase the strength of "efforts to combat sexual violence, particularly against migrant women and girls," as well as to promote reproductive health among migrants, and to develop policies to address the needs of "undocumented migrants, particularly...the victims of trafficking."⁶⁰

The needs of children and adolescents living on the streets are also being targeted through community-based interventions such as the At-Risk Youth Project, which is funded by USAID and currently being implemented in three Brazilian

cities. The project seeks to strengthen family ties and provide employment training in skills for which there is an established market. The program also specifically addresses the needs of girls and adolescent women who are at risk of or already involved in prostitution, by fostering linkages with municipal and state councils devoted to children's rights and by advocating for policy changes at both the state and federal level.⁶¹ Similar projects are currently underway in El Salvador, Guatemala, Indonesia and Vietnam.⁶²

Conclusions

That Congress attendees were a diverse group, representing not only national governments and international rights organizations but also law enforcement, academia, the health care professions and the media, is testament to the global recognition that an interdisciplinary approach will be required to eliminate sexual exploitation in its many manifestations. Clearly, no single intervention can adequately address the issues involved. Sustained efforts at legal reform and law enforcement, commitment to long-term development that increases access to resources for all members of a community, regardless of gender or social status, and improved adherence to the mandates of international human rights conventions are all strategies critical to achieving the goals of the Congress.

At the same time, those who seek to document the conditions of children and young people vulnerable to exploitation must strive to improve the reliability of their reports. The need for methodologically sound ways to define, measure and record the prevalence of exploitation and the conditions that encourage it is distressingly clear from an examination of the available materials. Moreover, such improvements are essential if changes in the circumstances of vulnerable youths are to be achieved.

Lastly, the pervasiveness of gender discrimination underlies many of the issues highlighted at the Congress. While boys and young men the world over also confront exploitation in their daily lives, it is girls and young women who are most vulnerable to the short- and long-term consequences of sexual exploitation. At Cairo, at Beijing, and now, in Stockholm, the detrimental impact of gender inequality on the human rights of girls and women has been illuminated and reinforced. Ultimately, the message of the World Congress echoes that of the global conferences that have preceded it: If the international community is to succeed in protecting the

world's most vulnerable citizens, it must first succeed in valuing them.

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