

**Inter-American Cooperation Programme for the
Prevention and Eradication of Sexual Exploitation,
Smuggling of and Trafficking in Children**

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**Reflections on the sexual exploitation of children
with a gender perspective**

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Gender: Concept and Approach

“Gender” can be defined as a social and cultural construction of sex differences. On the basis of this concept, the determining nature of a person’s biological sex in what it means to be a “man” or a “woman” can be brought into question.

Existing models of socialization in our cultures sustain and legitimize relations based on hierarchy and domination that regulate social relations and interactions. Portrayals that attribute the power in the family and society to men and that conceive women as inferior in a number of spheres (including in sexuality, as they are perceived as sexual objects at the disposal of men, ignoring their nature as desiring subjects), unequal divisions of family responsibility and other aspects, are manifestations of gender inequalities that are transmitted from one generation to the next, through norms and mandates related to what is expected from a man or a woman, and have direct links to sexual exploitation.

The gender approach as a category of analysis sheds light on how, in historical terms, power has been distributed in a society, through roles and cultural mandates that are differentiated for women and men (which is, in turn, enmeshed with other variables such as ethnicity, social class, age), how these differences result in inequality and, in this regard, how it can inform possible interventions.

A gender approach to the sexual exploitation of children

Under the patriarchal model, where power asymmetries have led to the supremacy of masculinity and virility and the subordination and subjection of femininity, sexual violence functions as an expression of this domination.

Ways of thinking about, feeling and experiencing sexuality are included in the stereotypical models of “masculine” and “feminine”. A man is active, strong and enjoys sexual relationships, while a woman is passive, accepting of men’s initiatives and is denied the enjoyment dimension. According to the patriarchal model, sexuality is exercised upon the other and not with the other. In this context, men have the right of access to sex, either in the form of an alleged right acquired through marriage or through payment, or as a form of physical, moral or financial coercion.

¹ We are grateful for the cooperation of Mariana Nicolau, intern at the IIN-OAS during the second half of 2018.

The sexual exploitation of children is also an expression of this gender violence, to which the determining factor of age is added. A strongly chauvinistic and adult-centred culture, and social and economic inequality are some of the causes of child sexual exploitation.

Paying for sex with minors is a paradigmatic expression of the way of thinking and living sexuality that is propounded by the patriarchy. The vulnerability of the victims, payment as a form of appropriating another's body, unilateral pleasure; all of these elements express an asymmetrical form of power in which man confirms his virility, his strength and his capacity to subject others, in a context in which power is eroticized.

Thus, the gender approach provides a key with which to address intervention and the phenomenon of child sexual exploitation. We should reflect upon the place that children occupy in the social imaginary, challenge and redefine gender constructs from childhood and deconstruct mandates issued to both women and men, in order to make the search for gender and generational equity possible, as well as to confront violence and the vulnerabilities that the current system reproduces and perpetuates.

An immediate practical aspect that emerges from this is the importance of making sure that both men and women are included in intervention teams. This makes it possible to bring into play the different ways of connecting with child victims according to the sex/gender of their interlocutors and showing them that other forms of relationship are possible.

Client-exploiters and domination

Sexual violence against children and adolescents is not an isolated act committed by persons considered "abnormal", but a phenomenon which is part of the social organization of gender; that is, it is part of how man-woman relations are regulated. This kind of violence does not, therefore, arise from an uncontrollable sex drive related to male biology, but is a matter of historically and socially constructed power, reaffirmed on the basis of asymmetric and dominant relationships.

In this respect, it is necessary to change our assumptions regarding how to address a "client" of child sexual exploitation. Rather than insisting on labels that limit our understanding of the phenomenon to a question of individual morality, we should shed light on the economic, social, cultural and political realities involved in the development of both the demand for and the supply of sexual exploitation victims.

Among other things, it is important to analyse the social and cultural contexts that legitimize this form of violence, awarding supposed rights to men and obligations to women, and that even support the "sale of sex" as a way to make money. Such perverse contexts legitimize and foster these practices, and then disown and punish their victims, with no consequences for the complex framework that makes them possible.

The victims of sexual exploitation

The most frequent victims of sexual exploitation are girls and most of the perpetrators are male. However, without disproving the patriarchal source of these relationships, we cannot ignore the existence of male child and adolescent victims, or of women who buy sex.² In addition, owing to the same social construction of gender, boys and girls experience sexual violence and sexual exploitation in different ways.

The gender perspective contributes to reflection and awareness of the specific experiences and challenges that girls and boys face in situations involving sexual exploitation and thus bolsters efforts in prevention and protection.

Exploited male children and adolescents

One of the aspects that has a great impact on the way male children and youth feel about and express situations involving sexual exploitation is related to “hegemonic models of masculinity”. Boys are socialized to be strong and protective providers. Consequently, any sexual violence they experience is linked to feelings of shame, uncertainty and confusion. They may also feel that reporting sexual exploitation or asking for help makes them appear weak or “unmanly”, so they are less likely to seek help, particularly from formally established services.

At the same time, some studies indicate that boys and male teenagers who are victims of sexual violence can also be victims of the homophobic attitudes of families, service providers, justice officials and/or the police.³

Assuming that boys involved in sexual exploitation are homosexual is a misconception. These relationships with adults of the same sex are imposed in the context of the power relations that we referred to above, and, while they may well lead to some level of confusion regarding sexual orientation, they do not determine it. However, we must point out that homosexual, bisexual and transgender children and adolescents are certainly more exposed to violence, especially psychological violence. Society’s hostile reactions to gender and sexuality lead to their marginalization, which increases their vulnerability to sexual exploitation even further.

² IIN-OAS, 2013: Issues Note N° 2/13. *Consumers of children's bodies: key players in the propagation of CSEC.*

³ Promundo (2012), *Hidden Violence: Preventing and responding to sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of adolescent boys.*

Girls and female adolescents exploited through forced marriages

In the case of girls and female adolescents, forced marriages are one of the forms of sexual exploitation prevailing in traditional gender constructions.

Although it has been the subject of legislation in different countries in the region, delivering girls to adult men in exchange for a supposed economic welfare is still a common practice, whether in the form of legal marriages, common-law marriages or the practice known as *criadazgo* (girls are provided with food and lodging in return for their services in the household).

In patriarchal societies, marrying a girl off implies transferring the obligations of the *pater familias* to another man who “will take care of her”, keeping her in a position of subordination and dependence. It is a way of ensuring that a woman continues to play her feminine role of docility and obedience in the home. Girls who are forced to marry have no choice but to move from their parents’ home to being totally dependent on their partners.

There is also a mistaken assumption that marriage at an early age will protect a girl from sexual violence, without considering that this is a form of violence in itself and that sexual violence also occurs between couples.

Marrying in childhood or adolescence has serious social, psychological and health consequences. Among the most serious social consequences for girls are the denial of the possibility of maintaining contact with their peers, going to school, working and achieving financial independence; all of which isolates girls socially and restricts them to their family settings. Among the health consequences they face are an increased risk of suffering complications in pregnancy and childbirth, of getting HIV/AIDS and of being subjected to sexual, domestic and other forms of violence. In some cultures, the issue of female genital mutilation aggravates the problem of forced marriages.

Some final thoughts...

Beyond all of the different forms that SEC can take, the common denominator is a sexual experience in circumstances of asymmetrical power. These asymmetries arise from the presence of very different factors: socio-economic, cultural, age and, most especially, gender.

Applying the gender perspective to an analysis of SEC involves including the power dimension as a key aspect, which transcends individual behaviors or possible deviations, in order to situate it as a paradigmatic expression of one of the focal points of this culture: the patriarchal conception. The identification and analysis of power relations places us within the realm of policy.

From this perspective, the eradication of SEC involves, essentially, the deconstruction of the cultural aspects that sustain and reproduce it. Among them, anchoring children and youth to the position of actual or potential victims. Deconstructing asymmetries of power involves strengthening children and teenagers so that they can become full social and political individuals, recognizing their capabilities and breaking their silence, which is the principal accomplice of all forms of abuse and exploitation.