



**International Labour Organization  
International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)**

**Costa Rica  
The commercial sexual exploitation of minors:  
A Rapid Assessment**

**By  
María Cecilia Claramunt**

**April 2002, Geneva**

## Preface

Unacceptable forms of exploitation of children at work exist and persist, but they are particularly difficult to research due to their hidden, sometimes illegal or even criminal nature. Slavery, debt bondage, trafficking, sexual exploitation, the use of children in the drug trade and in armed conflict, as well as hazardous work are all defined as Worst Forms of Child Labour. Promoting the Convention (No. 182) concerning the Prohibition and immediate action for the Elimination of the Worst Forms of Child Labour, 1999, is a high priority for the International Labour Organization (ILO). Recommendation (No. 190, Paragraph 5) accompanying the Convention states that “detailed information and statistical data on the nature and extent of child labour should be compiled and kept up to date to serve as a basis for determining priorities for national action for the abolition of child labour, in particular for the prohibition and elimination of its worst forms, as a matter of urgency.” Although there is a body of knowledge, data, and documentation on child labour, there are also still considerable gaps in understanding the variety of forms and conditions in which children work. This is especially true of the worst forms of child labour, which by their very nature are often hidden from public view and scrutiny.

Against this background the ILO, through IPEC/SIMPOC (International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour/Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour) has carried out 38 rapid assessments of the worst forms of child labour in 19 countries and one border area. The investigations have been made using a new rapid assessment methodology on child labour, elaborated jointly by the ILO and UNICEF<sup>1</sup>. The programme was funded by the United States Department of Labor.

The investigations on the worst forms of child labour have explored very sensitive areas including illegal, criminal or immoral activities. The forms of child labour and research locations were carefully chosen by IPEC staff in consultation with IPEC partners. The rapid assessment investigations focused on the following categories of worst forms of child labour: children in bondage; child domestic workers; child soldiers; child trafficking; drug trafficking; hazardous work in commercial agriculture, fishing, garbage dumps, mining and the urban environment; sexual exploitation; and working street children.

To the partners and IPEC colleagues who contributed, through their individual and collective efforts, to the realisation of this report I should like to express our gratitude. The responsibility for opinions expressed in this publication rests solely with the authors and does not imply endorsement by the ILO.

I am sure that the wealth of information contained in this series of reports on the situation of children engaged in the worst forms of child labour around the world will contribute to a deeper understanding and allow us to more clearly focus on the challenges that lie ahead. Most importantly, we hope that the studies will guide policy makers, community leaders, and practitioners to tackle the problem on the ground.



Frans Röselaers  
Director  
International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC)  
International Labour Office  
Geneva, 2001

---

<sup>1</sup> Investigating Child Labour: Guidelines for Rapid Assessment - A Field Manual, January 2000, a draft to be finalized further to field tests, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/ipecc/simpoc/guides/index.htm>

## Executive Summary

The commercial sexual exploitation of children and adolescents in Costa Rica is a social problem that has only recently received public recognition. The issue is now included in the national agenda and there is much debate over such questions as its magnitude and how to deal with it. Although there is evidence that sexual trade involving girls and adolescents has existed since colonial times, it is only in the past few years that there has been a concerted attempt to recognize the problem as a form of exploitation and sexual slavery, and as such, as a grave violation of the human rights of the child.

The Costa Rican context with regard to the problem of sexual exploitation may be summarized as follows:

- The existence of the problem is recognized in the country and has been given an important place on the agenda of public discussion: presidential speeches, political debates, newspaper editorials and reports, academic research, various fora and organized discussion groups, among others.
- Commercial sexual exploitation is a crime punishable by imprisonment. Correspondingly, there is a specialized inspector's office assigned to deal with this issue and a growing number of cases are being reported. This has contributed to greater information on the character of this offense and to its identification as a form of organized crime that is supported by national and foreign networks and, in some parts of the country, is linked to drug trafficking and other crimes.
- Increasingly, the children and adolescents involved are being seen as victims—and not as perpetrators.
- Social and government responses remain poorly coordinated in terms of dealing effectively and comprehensively with the problem.

The overall aim of this study is to analyze the problem of sexual exploitation in Costa Rica along three main lines: the social response of the country, the local response in two Costa Rican communities (Desamparados and Limón) and a profile of the experiences of 100 child and adolescent victims of sexual exploitation.

This research is part of a regional study sponsored by the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) of the International Labour Organization (ILO), which seeks to analyze the situation of sexual exploitation and the social response to it in seven countries: Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. Consequently, it is based on the same objectives, Rapid Assessment (RA) methodology and data collection instruments as those advanced by the ILO. As a result, it may be characterized as a qualitative study that emphasizes the description and analysis of results and makes no attempt to generalize the quantitative data it contains.

The results of the study are presented in accordance with the three areas of research mentioned previously: the national context, the local contexts and the experiences of child and adolescent victims. These results may be summarized as follows:

- a. What is most striking in terms of the national context is that the issue now features prominently on the public agenda. It is discussed in newspaper editorials, presidential speeches, and research publications and is a major topic of interest among international organizations with offices in Costa Rica. Nevertheless, the Government's response is still in the initial stages and is characterized by a low level of coordination among institutions and the lack of a model of comprehensive assistance for victims. However, great strides have been made with regard to the judicial and legislative response.
- b. The local context has been identified through observation in places linked to the sexual trade, interviews and workshops with community leaders and social workers dealing with children and adolescents, as well as an opinion poll of 200 persons from the selected communities (Desamparados and Limón). It may be summarized as follows: Although the existence of the problem of sexual exploitation is recognized, there are no plans of action for dealing with it. Opinion polls indicate that large percentages of the population know or have seen victims of sexual exploitation and places that exploit minors, but have not taken any action in response. This may be interpreted as a form of tolerance of this type of violation of children's and adolescents' rights.
- c. The experiences of the victims of sexual exploitation, which were related in interviews conducted with 100 children and adolescents (50 in San José and 50 in Limón), may be summarized as follows: The majority of the young people come from poor homes characterized by family violence. Their rights have been violated since their earliest childhood, especially those relating to parental protection and care, protection against all forms of abuse, and protection against the use of drugs and illegal substances.

In summary, the main challenges faced by the country include:

- The implementation, through specific programmes and actions, of the mandates arising from ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the national Code of Childhood and Adolescence and ILO's Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), all of which make specific reference to sexual exploitation.
- The promotion and development of universal policies that directly address the social, economic and ideological factors which render the under-18 population so vulnerable to sexual exploitation and foster the commission of this crime.

- The promotion and development of intersectorial programmes and institutions aimed at early prevention and at assisting young girls and adolescents at risk of sexual exploitation, or who are already its victims.
- The promotion and development of programmes of comprehensive assistance to victims, with rights and generation-based approach aimed at protecting and restoring all violated rights.
- The reform of legislation with a view to bringing penal standards into line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and ILO's Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, 1999 (No. 182), as well as the allocation of a larger budget dedicated specifically to battling sexual exploitation, taking into account the fact that investigating organized groups and networks requires high-technology resources and specialized training.
- The implementation of coordinated and sustainable strategic actions that are not vulnerable to changes in government administration.

*The full text of this report is available in Spanish at*  
[http://www.ilo.org/public/spanish/standards/ipec/simpoc/costarica/ra/sex\\_exp.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/public/spanish/standards/ipec/simpoc/costarica/ra/sex_exp.pdf)