

Britain: Charities criticise government indifference to child trafficking

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A coalition of nine major charities, including Unicef, Save the Children and the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC), recently presented a consultation paper to the UK Home Office on child trafficking into Britain.

The coalition—which is known as ECPAT (End Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking)—indicates that hundreds of children, some as young as six, are brought to Britain every year to be used as slave labour. It calls for urgent action to end the “cruel and shocking exploitation of children.”

Trafficked children are transported from all over Africa, Asia and eastern Europe by ruthless and highly organised gangs. Many of them are taken with the consent of their parents, who pay up to £3,000, believing the traffickers’ claims that their children are going to a better life and will be able to send money home.

The victims are often smuggled into Britain or brought in on false passports by adults posing as relatives. Most are put to work immediately, and many live in appalling conditions—often subjected to physical and sexual abuse.

Children from China, Vietnam and Malaysia have been found in sweatshops, restaurants and suburban cannabis factories. African children are often put into domestic servitude, working long hours for little or no reward.

Eastern European children tend to be used to beg and steal. Many more children are expected to be used to these ends next year when Romania and Bulgaria are expected to join the European Union.

Christine Beddoe, ECPAT director, has said that she believes the estimated figures for trafficked children cited in the consultation document could be significantly higher. She described the situation as

“modern child slavery.”

The ECPAT document is highly critical of the lack of “specific support services” in the UK that could help children escape their traffickers, as well as government indifference towards the whole issue.

More damning still, it states that the government’s draconian asylum and immigration policy is placing trafficked children and young people in peril. The document accuses the government of using “an unsympathetic and punitive asylum process” to treat them as “illegal immigrants” rather than victims of traffickers. Most trafficked children who come to the authorities’ attention are deported immediately and then face persecution and re-trafficking.

Although child trafficking has spread from London to other major cities across Britain—most notably Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle—it is still the capital that is the centre of human trafficking into the UK.

The ECPAT research identified suspected cases of trafficked children in all but one of the 33 London boroughs. Another report, published last year by the children’s charity Barnardo’s, found that 12 local authorities in London had dealt with young foreigners forced into prostitution after apparently being trafficked into western Europe. Among the typical cases found in London by the ECPAT study were a 10-year-old Ghanaian and an 11-year-old Nigerian child subjected to domestic slavery, and a 13-year-old Vietnamese girl forced into prostitution.

ECPAT found that Vietnamese children have been locked in cannabis factories set up in boarded-up suburban houses, their job being to switch the lights on and off over the plants, and control the temperature. Chinese children have been discovered working long hours in restaurants and sweatshops. The charity

coalition is currently investigating such cases in Manchester, Newcastle and Liverpool.

A case that underscores how government asylum policy aids child exploitation is that of Victoria, who was brought to Britain from Uganda, aged 15. After witnessing the massacre of her family, a supposed “friend” ferried Victoria to London, sold her to two men and disappeared.

When the men tried to rape her, Victoria fled. Living on the streets, and fearful of the police, she started selling sex to survive before finally turning to an NSPCC centre. She faces deportation next year and fears that she will be targeted again by the traffickers in Uganda.

Although the charities and police believe most trafficked children into the UK are used for slave labour rather than prostitution, child victims of trafficking are often “sexually exploited in informal locations, such as private flats, where they are expected to have sex with groups of men.”

Mistrustful of the authorities, most trafficked children only come to attention when they escape from, or are kicked out by, their controllers and turn up at a charity office, or when they are picked up by the police for stealing or being involved in prostitution.

The United Nations estimates that 1.5 million children under 16 are trafficked worldwide each year—a figure widely viewed as a substantial underestimation. Those children trafficked from across eastern Europe are most often put to work in Germany, Italy and Austria. Britain is a key territory for traffickers who procure children from Africa and the Far East, as well as eastern Europe and the Baltic states.

ECPAT is calling for a national strategy, including safe houses for victims, counselling and legal and medical support, and an independent Child Trafficking Rapporteur. It has urged the government to ratify the European Convention against Trafficking in Human Beings to allow victims to stay in the UK to recover from their ordeal and receive help so they can testify against the traffickers.

At best, however, this can only provide a temporary respite for some. ECPAT has painted a picture of acute human misery in which the most vulnerable members of society are transported from country to country to experience horrendous levels of exploitation. This trade, in which huge sums of money are being made,

feeds off the increasingly desperate plight of many regions of the planet, and is fuelled by governmental indifference and/or complicity.

What is needed is to tackle the problem at its source. An economic and political system that makes commodities of children—to be bought and sold on a market—must be replaced by a system that places social welfare above private profit.



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