



Youth participation: A Way to Fight Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children

The right for a child to be heard is specifically recognized by Article 12 in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). This principle supports a child's freedom to express and form their own views and opinions on issues that affect their life. Child participation is not only a right in itself but is also considered one of the four guiding principles of the UNCRC.¹ This means it must be taken into account in the interpretation and application of all other children's rights, including the right to be protected against sexual abuse and exploitation.

Youth participation in the fight against commercial sexual exploitation is one of the cornerstones of ECPAT's work. During the First World Congress against the Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents which brought together, on the initiative of ECPAT Sweden, government representatives, non-governmental organizations and international institutions, witnessed the active participation of 17 children delegates. The Agenda for Action adopted at the end of the First Congress explicitly included the participation of children.² The world congresses that followed in Yokohama and Rio de Janeiro had even more child delegates that joined in discussions and helped create commitments for action.

"This is a giant step in the right direction for those who think they know better. However, there is still the need for the voices of children and young people (...) to be fully addressed and integrated into all programs of action. Governments should support the participation of children and adolescents (...) We are one step closer to solutions that are more effective, appropriate and sustainable"³ [Our translation].

How can the children's participation be a way to fight against commercial sexual exploitation of children and how can this participation be implemented? This analysis will explore these two topics.

¹ UNICEF, 2010, Article found at: http://www.unicef.org/rightsite/433_468.htm

² First World Congress against Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents, Declaration and Agenda action, Stockholm, 1996, available at: http://www.csecworldcongress.org/PDF/fr/Stockholm/Outcome_documents/Stockholm%20Declaration%201996_FRE.pdf

³ Second World Congress against Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents, Final Appeal of children and young people, Yokohama, 2001, available at: http://www.csecworldcongress.org/PDF/en/Yokohama/Outcome_documents/Young%20People%20Final%20Appeal%20in%20Yokohama.pdf

The Importance of Youth Participation in the Fight Against Commercial Sexual Exploitation

Over the years, research has shown that when children have the opportunity to express their views and share their experiences, it has a positive impact on their well being as well as the well being of the entire society.⁴

Participation of children and protection against commercial sexual exploitation

Like youth participation, protection is also at the heart of the Convention of Children's Rights. However, participation and protection of children have been more in opposition than in correlation with each other. This is in part due to ensuring that children are treated differently from adults because of their greater vulnerability, while at the same time they are treated as equal and competent actors and are able to exercise and defend their rights. On an issue as serious as sexual exploitation for commercial purposes, fear for the safety of children and their welfare has often led to perceive children as passive recipients of protection and, therefore, their participation has often been overlooked or ignored. Yet, protecting children against sexual exploitation and guaranteeing their right to be heard are closely related. Both depend on the perception of children as individuals and fundamental holders of their rights.⁵

When children have the opportunity to express their opinions, they are better equipped to protect themselves against exploitation, as well as influential in helping to protect other children. Their voices are a powerful tool to challenge violations of their rights. Today, children continue to lack the support to exercise their rights and are more vulnerable to violations and abuse. By encouraging participation, the culture of silence surrounding CSEC may be broken. For child victims of sexual exploitation, sharing their experiences, feelings and opinions can inform adults about what should be in place to better protect them and end further exploitation. Child participation is essential to assess the real needs of children and suggest better solutions. It also plays an important role in evaluating protective measures already in place. Numerous measures taken to protect children have been ineffective, inadequate and sometimes more destructive than protective. However, children are often the only ones to assess whether certain interventions and decisions to protect are actually effective.⁶ It is important to understand the real impact of these measures on a child's well-being.

⁴ Center for Study of Social Policy, Engaging youth in community decision-making, Washington DC. 2007, p. 6, available at: <http://www.cssp.org/community/constituents-co-invested-in-change/other-resources/engaging-youth-in-communitydecision-making.pdf>

⁵ Carolyn Willow, Children' right to be heard and effective child protection: A guide for Governments and children rights advocates on involving children and young people in ending all forms of violence, Save the Children, Suède, 2010, p.8, available at: <http://resourcecentre.savethechildren.se/sites/default/files/documents/2481.pdf>

⁶ Ibid, p. 41

Participation of children and prevention of commercial sexual exploitation

There are many participatory channels that allow children to prevent sexual exploitation such as contributing to research, consultation, sharing information and advice with other young people, and being involved in the design and implementation of programs and awareness campaigns for children and adolescents, families and communities. Child participation contributes significantly to broadening the scope of awareness and advocacy. Actions taken by youth can be creative, simple messages that are more clear and direct.

Awareness campaigns carried out by young people can have a great impact on many levels. It provides the opportunity to bring the issue of commercial sexual exploitation closer to communities, families and schools. By supporting this, communities may look more positively on children as social actors, as well as change their attitudes and tolerance of situations of abuse and exploitation committed against children. Through their participation in preventive actions young people are empowered to make the government and adults more accountable and will foster practices that develop the realization of their right to protection.⁷

"They encourage us to imagine the children we know and even remind us of the children we once were. Children are able to speak(...) for themselves and the effects can be extremely powerful (...)" [OurTranslation].⁸

In addition to their participation and collaboration in the implementation of preventive measures, the testimony and analysis of children and young people will help to better understand the causes and consequences of commercial sexual exploitation.⁹ This is essential in creating prevention measures. Children can encourage ideas that have not been thought of or even considered and may better question patterns of discrimination and exclusion.

The implementation of children's participation in the fight against exploitation

Despite its undeniable importance, the implementation of children's participation in the fight against CSEC is often questioned, neglected or ignored, creating many obstacles. Many initiatives involving children are more symbolic and do not really take their views into account. The involvement of children in decision-making is also perceived as a threat to adult authority. However, involving children and adolescents on many levels, is crucial and only possible if adults allow youth to engage.

⁷ Claire O'Kane, "Children and Young People as Citizens: Partners for Social Change", Save the Children, 2003, p.91

⁸ Carolyne Willow, Children's right to be heard and effective child protection: A guide for Governments and children rights advocates on involving children and young people in ending all forms of violence, op.cit, p. 42

⁹ Ibid, p. 41

Which measures are needed?

Article 12 of the UNCRC is both a substantial and procedural law, which means that when children have the right to participate and express themselves freely, governments must, in turn, create mechanisms to facilitate and promote this participation.¹⁰ In order for children's participation to be fully effective, children must also have other civil rights recognized such as the right of access to relevant information (appropriate to their age, their ability and circumstances). Children should be informed about the risks related to sexual exploitation, how to exercise their rights, including the right to be heard at trial, how to report cases of abuse, and knowledge of the various support services available. Being informed is not only a right but also a power that enables children to make choices and decisions for their future well-being.

The Committee on Children's Rights also encourages State initiatives promoting the participation of children in particular through the establishment of institutions, parliaments, and councils involving young people.¹¹ In Europe, many states have implemented this, including parliaments and youth councils that enable young people to express themselves and give their opinion on a range of topics affecting democratic life. Such opportunities allow young people to shape their own opinions and potentially influence the process of decision making. However, very few of these structures are used to strengthen the role of children in the fight against sexual exploitation, including Belgium.¹² A study conducted by ECPAT International showed that in Europe, the participation of children against commercial sexual exploitation was limited to their involvement in research and consultation (mainly by non-governmental organizations) in outreach activities (mainly on the issue of sex tourism) and less so in conferences organized against the sexual exploitation.¹³ Real consideration for a youth perspective and participation in the design of policies and programs against sexual exploitation are still marginal. In states that have adopted a national plan of action against the commercial sexual exploitation of children, only few have taken into account the participation of children under the priority actions and the development of these plans. Furthermore, consulting youth for writing reports on the implementation of the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child pornography and child prostitution children was rare.

Examples of programs focusing on child participation

Despite the difficulties, some progress has been made in the implementation of youth participation programs supporting initiatives to fight against CSEC. There are

¹⁰ ECPAT International, "Article 12 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: Taking their views into account", Bangkok, October 2011, p.7

¹¹ Feinstein, Clare et Claire O'Kane, "Children's and Adolescents' Participation and Protection from Sexual Abuse and Exploitation", UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, Florence, February 2009, p. 9

¹² See in particular ECPAT Belgium, Global Monitoring Report of the implementation of actions against sexual exploitation of children for commercial purposes, 2014, p. 36

¹³ ECPAT International, "Ensuring Meaningful Child and Youth Participation in the Fight against Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children: The ECPAT Experience", Bangkok, 2007, p.23

increasingly more examples worldwide, as well as projects and programs focused on children's participation. The Youth Partnership Project by ECPAT International is a sample program based on the participation of youth against sexual exploitation of children for commercial purposes. This project aims to strengthen the capacity of children against CSEC and risky sex, to play an active role in the design, implementation, decision making and monitoring of projects designed to protect. Leadership training organized by youth support programs and micro-projects managed by the youth have taught other children how to better protect themselves and their peers.¹⁴ Through this project, ECPAT invited young children to use their expertise to protect and advocate for the recognition of their rights in their communities, families, and governments.

Another example of a project based on the active participation of young people is the European project, "Make-IT-safe," in which ECPAT Belgium is a partner organization. Its primary purpose is to raise awareness among young people between 12 and 18 on safe and responsible use of the Internet, with a focus particularly on the potential risks associated with online sexual abuse. The special feature of this project is the training of young people in online security, as well as education and training on helping their peers in protecting against the risks of new technologies.¹⁵ Both projects are based on the "peer-to-peer" methodology that is being used more and more in programs of prevention and protection because of the many benefits it can provide. Through this methodology, young people are encouraged to strengthen their capacity, take action in protecting themselves and preventing the risk of future abuse on young people.

Conclusion

Child participation can have a significant impact on the fight against commercial sexual exploitation, as well as protective and preventative measures. Government commitments on children's participation in the fight against sexual exploitation made at three World Congresses were weakly followed in practice. While some progress can be seen – namely, government prevention programs involving children, youth consultation involving studies of sexual exploitation, and child representation at conferences, etc., - most efforts are infrequent rather than systematic. Belgium is no exemption, and much remains to be provided by the Belgian Government, and non-governmental organizations to actually account for children's views and involve youth in the fight against commercial sexual exploitation.

¹⁴ ECPAT International, " Youth Partnership Project : Guidelines young Caring Program under YPP " Bangkok , January 2010, p.10

¹⁵ For more information on the implementation of the project in Belgium and created tools <http://ecpat.be/actions/projet-make-itsafe/>

This analysis was written in December 2014 by Camille Seccaud (trainee) and reviewed by ECPAT Belgium.

ECPAT Belgium is the Belgian member of ECPAT International (End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes). The mission of ECPAT Belgium is to fight against sexual exploitation of children for commercial purposes: child prostitution, child pornography, trafficking of children for sexual purposes and child sex tourism.

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