

Crack down on child sex tourists

STIMES0020050520e15I00027

Review - Others

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906 Words

21 May 2005

Straits Times

English

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THE recent frank discussion in the press and Parliament on the issue of Singaporeans sexually exploiting children and trafficked women is a welcome development. In particular, the Home Affairs Ministry statement that it is seriously considering appropriate legislation is a significant step.

Focusing on the demand component in such sexual abuse is progress.

This region has largely viewed the issue in its supply side context - the result of poverty, structural inequality, absence of effective legislation and weak or corrupt law enforcement. While these are without doubt key factors, there has been globally a relative silence on how more affluent citizens exploit the gaps at home and abroad to buy the sexual services of women and children who are often forced to work under exploitative, degrading conditions. Effective legislation is undoubtedly important, but as Senior Minister of State for Law and Home Affairs, Associate Professor Ho Peng Kee, pointed out in Parliament on Monday the problem is not solely the Government's responsibility. There are three main challenges which require broader social cooperation.

First, there is the network that facilitates access to under-aged prostitutes and trafficking victims. This embraces Internet chat rooms and websites in the virtual world and, on the ground, tour operators, taxi drivers, pimps, hotel staff and others who often benefit from the fees-for-service. Tackling this requires a counter network of caring citizens who will report such transactions or victims in need.

Second, the networks are not merely local but also transnational. Effective action requires the cooperation of civil society, businesses and law enforcement both within and between their sectors, and across national boundaries.

Third, it is not easy but important that we acknowledge our culture of silence on sexual offences and related issues. Our laws identify and severely punish sexual offenders. However, society also punishes the victims by stigmatising them and their families when they seek help. In the absence of a compassionate response, victims of sexual abuse and their families, as well as offenders' families, often see silence as their only option. The Government cannot solve this, but as friends and community members, we can.

The customers

ULTIMATELY, the source of demand must be addressed. Who are these customers? Singaporean sex tourists who travel to nearby low-cost locations to procure sex services from minors and trafficked girls are mostly 'preferential' or 'situational' abusers, not paedophiles per se.

Preferential abusers seek out ever younger girls or boys for a variety of reasons: a sense of power, a fallacious belief that they are 'cleaner' and therefore lower the risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases. Some labour under an even more misguided notion that 'virginal' girls have curative or restorative effects on men.

Situational offenders are those who do not specifically seek out young girls but are presented with the opportunity, and choose to accept. They may be motivated by similar

reasons to the preferential abuser. Or perhaps they choose to ignore the fact that the girl is under-aged, or rationalise their actions as being in the girl's best interest (for example, by providing her with an income or by using her service, help her avoid punishment by her pimp or abuse by a client who is less kind).

Establishing that the sexual exploitation of children while overseas is a criminal act and making it clear that society is not willing to turn a blind eye will deter potential preferential and situational offenders, if not hardcore paedophiles. Public education, backed up by force of law, will make for a more vigilant community that does not condone such behaviour. Enforcement is no doubt challenging and complex. Challenges include obtaining reliable evidence and witnesses, protecting victims and managing the complexities of transnational cooperation. Nonetheless, there is an upward trend in the number of successful prosecutions in countries that have child sex tourism laws in place, as more experience is gained and techniques become more sophisticated.

In the business sector, willingness to act has been muted, but some airlines and hotel groups have a clear policy of taking a stand against child sex tourism by educating their customers. Some even have a reporting mechanism in place to assist law enforcement. Over time, it is hoped that this group of enlightened tourism players will grow.

A Code of Conduct (<http://www.thecode.org>) promulgated by the non-governmental organisation End Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking, the World Tourism Organisation and the United Nations Children's Fund has been endorsed by many governments, most recently the United States and Japan.

Tourism companies that adopt the code commit themselves to establishing an ethical policy against commercial sexual exploitation of children, providing relevant staff training, requiring suppliers to take a common stand on the issue and educating customers.

Last but not least, public education is crucial. We can punish and shame offenders, but it is how the rest of us raise our children, teach values of respect and self-worth, and act towards our fellow humans that will make the long-term difference. Child sex tourism and sexual abuse and exploitation of vulnerable women and children should not be seen only as a crime but also a deep festering moral wound.

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