



EVEN ONE KID EXPLOITED IS A TRAGEDY

NEWPAP0020070923e39o00007

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1072 Words

24 September 2007

The New Paper

English

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S'pore is to get tougher child sex laws. Activists say it's about time SERENE had been a prostitute for two years in Indonesia, and had had sex with 300 men, some of whom were Singaporeans. She was only 14.

At 16, Jane, a regular Internet user, has had her fair share of men who try to ask her out when she visits chatrooms.

One even offered to show her pictures of his private parts.

Sex predators are on the prowl for young girls like Serene and Jane (not their real names, which have been withheld to protect their identities).

Last week, the Ministry of Home Affairs presented the first reading of changes to the Penal Code. These will include laws to tackle sex predators.

One of the recommendations is to make commercial sex here and overseas with anyone below 18 a crime.

Ms Saleemah Ismail, president of the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem) Singapore, has visited Indonesia and Cambodia where she claimed some Singapore men go for sex with underaged girls.

Unifem runs programmes to help women develop business skills and provide access to education and health.

Ms Saleemah, who joined Unifem Singapore in 2003, met Serene in 2005.

Serene told her that after two years in the sex industry, she managed to leave with a social worker.

Serene developed warts because of her sexual activities.

Changes to the laws here will mean organising sex tours and having sex with girls under the age of 16 will land a man in trouble here.

Said Ms Saleemah: 'Whether it's 10 or 100 kids, it does not matter if you knowingly exploit a child.'

'Even if only one child is exploited, it is a tragedy.'

'The amendment will be a huge deterrent to Singaporean men against going overseas to have sex with children.'

'But everyone needs to help enforce it like travellers reporting other travellers to the authorities if they are seen exploiting children.'

TOUGHER LAWS

Ms Braema Mathi, former nominated MP and former president of women's right group Aware, wants to make the laws even tougher.

Ms Mathi, who chairs the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (Cedaw) sub-committee, said a stiffer sentence should be imposed on those who have sex with younger children like those below 12.

The law should be especially hard on paedophiles.

She added: 'For a long time, we have been in denial regarding Singaporeans who go overseas for sex with kids.'

'These amendments now mean that Singapore is part of a global solution to a global problem.'

'It's a clear signal towards this group of people (who travel abroad for sex with kids) that they can't just shift their operations offshore.'

'They will still face stiffer penalties as they will be brought home.'

Sex predators also hunt down young girls here on the Internet.

The number of men charged with having sex with underaged girls here has been climbing. There were 114 cases in 2001 and 217 cases last year.

In 2005, a 21-year-old man was jailed two months after admitting to having paid \$30 to have sex with a 14-year-old girl at the condo of the girl's boyfriend.

The girl had money problems and had agreed to have sex for money with several men whom her 20-year-old boyfriend knew.

Girls can also be sexually harassed on the Internet. As in Jane's case.

A man used sexually explicit language with her and made a lewd proposition.

Under the new offence of sexual grooming, anyone 21 or older can be prosecuted if he or she has met or communicated with someone under 16 on at least two occasions even before the sexual act is committed.

This means that as long as a person contacts a child for sex it is a crime, even if he doesn't carry out the act.

And it does not matter if the meeting takes place here or abroad.

Those found guilty can be jailed for up to three years and fined.

PATIENT PREDATOR

A 2004 study done on online grooming by the Cyberspace Research Unit at the University of Central Lancashire found that groomers are extremely patient.

They are willing to wait months - sometimes more than a year - before arranging to meet their victims in person.

Research by the United Nations Children's Fund (Unicef) also showed that as many as one in five children who use computer chat rooms have been approached over the Internet by paedophiles.

And they expect the problem to increase as more kids get access to the Internet worldwide.

The Straits Times reported last year that molest cases involving contacts met via the Internet and phone chat lines increased from 10 in 2004 to 14 last year.

In the same period, the number of rape cases in which the culprits met their victims the same way went up from five to 13.

Most of the victims were teens.

Of the 13 rape cases, 11 victims - 84 per cent - were 11- to 18-year-olds, said a police spokesman.

And nine of the 14 molest victims - 64 per cent - who had first met their attackers online, were between the ages of 12 and 19.

Mr Harry Low, a counsellor from the NUS Counselling Centre, told The New Paper that this amendment was timely as many children today, some as young as 6, use the Internet on a regular basis.

And with kids enjoying more freedom, society has to ensure their safety.

Said Mr Low: 'Children below 16 are not ready for this complicated world.'

'On the Internet, after chatting with someone several times, they might be emotionally attached to that person and think that he cares for them.'

Changes

Commercial sex with minors below 18 Illegal whether done here or overseas Maximum penalty is 7 years' jail and fine

Sexual penetration of minor under 16 If done with body part or object, maximum 10 years' jail and fine 20 years' jail, fine or caning if victim is below 14

Organising overseas sex tours with minors below 18 Includes printing and distribution of promotional material Maximum penalty of 10 years' jail and fine

Sexual grooming of minor under 16 Offence to meet or communicate with minor at least twice, here or overseas Penalty up to 3 years' jail, fine