



**Testimony before the US House of Representatives
Committee on Government Reform
Subcommittee on Wellness and Human Rights**

**”The Ongoing Tragedy of International Slavery and
Human Trafficking: An Overview”**

**Testimony of Andrew Johnson, U.N. Office Director
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On behalf of Save the Children, I would like to thank the House Government Reform Committee, Subcommittee on Wellness and Human Rights for the opportunity to speak to you today about the global situation of children caught up in human trafficking and slavery. In my presentation I will focus on those children trafficked into the sex trade and those children caught up in cycles of sexual slavery throughout the world.

First, I would like to tell you about the story of an inspirational girl I meet some years ago in Bangladesh. Sumi was 11 years old. She is a bright and intelligent and like many young girls her age, she has many hopes and dreams for herself. However, this is where the similarities end. Unlike other children, Sumi was raised in a brothel. She was bonded through poverty and circumstance to a life in the brothels, like all the other children born there. Located on the banks of the Padma River, Sumi resided in the Goulando Brothel with her 5-year-old brother and their mother, a brothel worker. The workers at the Brothel had no mean of escape and were bonded to their pimps.

Life in the brothel was very difficult for Sumi. Many children living in Goulando shared a tiny, congested room with their mothers. Having nowhere to go to play, children could not escape their rooms when their mother was with a customer. These conditions led many children around Sumi to fall prey to alcohol and drug addictions. Sumi felt trapped. Children from the brothels were not allowed to attend the community schools, and Sumi could not envision a positive future for herself.

Save the Children learned of the plight of these children and is now working to give them hope beyond the gates of Goulando village. Save the Children established a Safe Home that now houses 25 daughters of sex workers. The Safe Home assists in breaking the cycle of girl children who grow up in an unhealthy and dangerous environment, that eventually leads them to the trade of their mothers.

Through this initiative, Sumi was rescued and currently lives in the Safe Home, where she regularly attends classes and receives religious education. Most importantly, Sumi still maintains weekly contact with her brother and her mother, who still live in the brothel.

Unfortunately, Sumi is representative of millions of children who suffer from trafficking, sexual salvary and sexual exploitation. In fact Congress has estimated that between 800,000 – 900,000 people are trafficked each year worldwide -- 20,000 of these into the United States. The United Nations estimates that, in the last 30 years, trafficking in women and children for sexual exploitation in Asia alone has victimized more than 30 million people.

In international legislation, the term "trafficking" refers to criminal acts by third parties through which persons are transferred from one place to another within or across borders for the purpose of exploiting them. From the legal point of view, it is irrelevant whether a child under 18 has given informed consent to such acts and subsequent exploitation. In

practice, however, trafficking is facilitated by the fact that it does not necessarily require, or only partly requires, means of force and deception.

Most trafficked children come from poor families in economically disadvantaged countries of widespread poverty or where combinations of poverty, unemployment, armed violence, ethnic and racial conflicts, environmental degradation, abuse of power and corruption exist. Though boys are known to be trafficked for sexual purposes, as in general prostitution, adolescent girls represent a more significant group of victims. In many countries, girls' vulnerability to trafficking is also due to their low status in the community. Some children come from families that have become unable to provide care and protection because of divorce, drug abuse, domestic violence and the impoverishment of single parents. In some cases, children have become street children before being trafficked. Children in many of the Central and Eastern European countries have suffered abuse and neglect in under-resourced institutions. Children who have lost, or been separated from their families due to armed conflicts and persecution are similarly at risk of trafficking. Girls may already be engaged in prostitution and/or young single mothers under pressure to support their own children.

Save the Children's research displays a great variety as to the ways in which traffickers operate and the conditions under which children are sexually exploited. Children are trafficked through deception, abduction, through their own choice and in some cases they are knowingly sold by parents, relatives or other carers. For example, as indicated by reports from Nigeria and China, girls and their parents have contracted huge debts to the traffickers or paid them cash in advance to bring the girl to Europe on the understanding that she will make lots of money in non-exploitative occupations. In some countries, e.g. Albania, a typical form of deception is through a false offer of marriage from a trafficker. Findings from Save the Children's repatriation work with returning trafficking victims in Romania suggest that traffickers particularly target young and inexperienced girls since they are regarded as more easily manipulated. Thus children and their caretakers can indeed be ignorant of the future exploitation.

The pressure, insecurity and powerlessness experienced by trafficked children in prostitution is extraordinary, especially by those forced to be prostitutes in other countries than their own. Research undertaken by Save the Children in the brothel districts of Bangladesh shows that those girls who have been sold or traded and forced to enter prostitution are ranked very low and enjoy few rights within the internal hierarchy of that particular community.

In most parts of the world, children are separated from family, country and culture. They are many times ignorant of the language, usually illegally resident in the country of destination, deprived of identity documents and cut off from the surrounding society. Trafficked children are at the mercy of their exploiters. They may have little contact with people outside the world of prostitution, be afraid to ask for help and fear the police. They are subject to violence, rape, injury, sexually transmitted diseases and unwanted pregnancies with little or no access to healthcare and contraception. Pimps may threaten to hurt or kill them or their relatives should they attempt to escape and return home.

We very much welcome the steps that the Government has taken to treat children who have been trafficked for sexual purposes as victims rather than offenders. Unfortunately this approach is rare in most part of the world. Ultimately, if detected by the legal authorities, children are frequently treated as offenders rather than victims and run the risk of arrest and deportation. For those who became trafficked due to severe abuse in the first place, e.g. children sold by their parents, there may be no social safety nets to return to and they are trapped in an extremely desperate situation.

Trafficked, sexually exploited children who have returned to their country of origin have often faced extreme difficulties. Some have suffered condemnation by their families and the community and discrimination by public institutions. In some cases, headmasters have denied them access to schools and the local police have fined them for migration law offences. Those children who have managed to hide their true experiences from family and friends due to shame and guilt are of course often in a desperate need to talk to a person they can trust. Repatriation support must be a long-term commitment by national and local governments in the country of origin as well as by governments in the countries of transit/destination.

Recommendations:

- **Prevention shall address root causes at all levels**

Child sexual slavery and trafficking must be explicitly addressed in poverty eradication efforts and macroeconomic policy-making. In international development cooperation as well as in national budget allocations, high priority shall be accorded to the prevention of child sexual exploitation. Educational and economic opportunities must be created for groups of particular vulnerability such as women in poverty and ethnic minorities. A focus on child sexual exploitation shall be incorporated into the prevention of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, armed conflict and consequences of ecological and natural disasters. Appropriate means to deal with gender imbalance and issues of male and female sexuality must be developed to

- **Increase the development of and further commitment to the funding of exit and rehabilitation programs for children exploited and trafficked for sexual purposes**
- **Call upon and assist other governments to ensure that child victims of trafficking shall be offered support, temporary residential permits and safe conditions for giving testimony in the country of destination.**

Children who have been trafficked and sexually exploited are in an extremely vulnerable position, especially when illegally residing without documentation in other countries than their own. They may have been abused and/or neglected prior to being trafficked and lack social safety nets to return to. These children should receive psychosocial, medical, legal and economic support and be given an opportunity to testify against traffickers and exploiters under safe conditions in order to enable prosecution. The situation they are

likely to face if sent back to their home country and facilities for repatriation must be thoroughly investigated before their future residency is settled. Due consideration should be given to the best interest of the child in this regard.

- **All offences of sexual exploitation committed abroad should be capable of prosecution**

The United States government should take the lead internationally to ensure that countries enact legislation to ensure that their citizens as well as temporary and permanent residents are capable of prosecution for sexual offences against children under 18 committed in other countries without restrictions that render such legislation and law enforcement inefficient in practice.

- **Children have the right to influence and participate in the development of solutions to problems related to sexual exploitation and abuse**

Children should systematically be listened to in matters that concern them. Law enforcement and judicial practice must be adapted to children's particular needs and conditions. Children of vulnerable groups and experiential children and youth should be given the opportunity to play a central role in the creation, design, development and delivery of programs to stop trafficking.

- **Continuous research and investigation on child sexual exploitation shall be conducted in order to establish data bases which enable efficient interventions**

In order to elaborate efficient action plans, systematic and coherent collection of data on victims and offenders of sexual exploitation shall be undertaken at both national and regional levels. It is equally important to develop a thorough analysis of root causes and interrelations between child sexual exploitation and other problems with regard to both demand and supply aspects on which to base appropriate interventions.

In a letter that Sumi read to her village, she asked the following:

.....I have written an open letter to you. I like to read out this letter to you. I hope that you will listen to my letter with patience and attention.

We are all children. We have our rights. We also want to live as good citizens, we also want to live with other members of the society. I have a request to you that we also want your co-operation so that we can live like other children of the society. My mother is a prostitute. I hate prostitution. But I love my mother. I don't want to be a prostitute. I want to grow as a big personality by doing my study.

.....Save the Children do not have full capacity to provide all of us with full fledged accommodation and life. Therefore I appeal to you all for your sincere co-operation

On behalf of Sumi, I thank this committee, again for your interest and commitment to stopping child trafficking and slavery.