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The Dominican Republic Clamps Down on Sex Tourism

by Crosby Girón
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Sex tourism is a multi-million dollar business that employs millions of people throughout the world. Whether it is legal or illegal depends on various issues, such as the existing legal framework in the specific country, whether the activities carried out are consensual, or whether there are children involved.

According to estimates from international institutions such as the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), over 1 million children and adolescents every year are sexually exploited. Sex tourism has become such a lucrative industry worldwide that in some cases it reaches “a high level of sophistication and involves powerful criminal organizations at a local, national, and international level,” UNICEF reported in a 2005 study titled “Sexual Exploitation of Children and Adolescents: Working Towards Sustainable Tourism in Central America.”

For some sex criminals, discovering new destinations and unsuspecting locals is part of the attraction, said Karen Flanagan, a child protection specialist at Save the Children. In 2014, the online magazine The Richest published the 10 most popular sex tourism destinations. The Dominican Republic was ranked 10th. According to The Richest, between 60,000 and 100,000 women are involved in the sex trade in the Dominican Republic, a country where prostitution is not illegal, but sex with minors is, and many sex workers are underage. The Richest reporter Lacey Burns said one of the reasons why the Dominican Republic is regarded as a prime destination for sex tourism is its relatively easy access for European and American travelers.

As tourism booms, the economy and the social and cultural environment of many countries with a tourism-based economy change as well, since tourism can transform the fabric of society, can alter its traditional values and customs, and in many cases, can be used as a cover-up for illegal activities.

Swimming against the current
During the opening session of the First International Congress to Fight Online Child Pornography in May, the Dominican Republic’s attorney general, Francisco Domínguez Brito, said that Dominican authorities would continue to crack down on sex crimes, especially in tourist hotspots, as long as the country continued to be a destination for sex tourism.

Domínguez Brito said there was a recognition that child pornography exists in the Dominican Republic, that Dominican authorities have the necessary IT programs to crack down on these crimes, and that he had worked with child protection organizations to take the necessary measures to identify sex criminals. He added that although the authorities don’t have statistics on the problem, many cases have been reported, particularly cases involving adolescents.

“Although international reports rank us as one of the countries with the lowest number of child pornography cases, we need to fully eradicate this problem because it’s linked to a sex industry that can involve both children and adults,” he said.
Women ‘tricked’ into the business

With regard to sex tourism as a global industry, Domínguez Brito said that international networks often trick women into joining the sex trade and then send them abroad, where they are sexually exploited. He said that the Dominican Republic has the third highest number of women who are subjected to sexual exploitation, after Thailand and Colombia.

“Our women are being tricked, they take their passports and force them to take drugs,” Domínguez Brito said.

Despite the challenges, Domínguez Brito said his office has made efforts to clamp down on the sex trade in Puerto Plata and the municipality of Bávaro, in La Altagracia, where 31 victims of the sex trade were rescued by the police after the closure of a nightclub called Las Conejitas. According to many press reports, the Dominican Republic has been recognized as one of the countries that has most effectively cracked down on people trafficking, with a high number of traffickers sentenced and several networks dismantled.

People-trafficking networks have flourished in the context of the tourism boom, and the World Travel & Tourism Council has noted that in many developing countries it makes an important contribution to the economy. In Thailand, for example, when the sex tourism boom reached its peak in the 1990s, it contributed up to US$27 billion to the country’s GDP. The “spillover” of this market is distributed at a local level among hotels, corrupt police agents, tourism agencies, open air bars, saunas, cabarets, and even health clinics.

Dominican authorities are concerned that individuals are profiting from the sexual services performed in the context of tourism and worry about the contradictions presented by the sex trade, which on the one hand is deemed to be morally unacceptable but on the other is tolerated by society.

It remains to be seen how effective the authorities can be in terms of cracking down on sex tourism. Experts such as Save the Children’s Flanagan have pointed out that even legalization is an issue that needs to be discussed, because there is no guarantee that deep changes can be achieved. Flanagan told local media she is convinced that the only long-term solution is prevention, so that men become more aware of the destructive impact of the sex trade.

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