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## Concern Grows About the Rise of Child Exploitation, Trafficking in Dominican Republic

by Crosby Girón

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Human rights activists are alarmed that child prostitution and trafficking have become common in the Dominican Republic. The practice has been accepted as a source of income by many of the victims' families, who receive money, gifts, and other goods in exchange for allowing their children to be exploited, activists say. ([NotiCen, Aug. 18, 2016](#)).

In 2015, according to UNICEF República Dominicana, the Attorney General's Office (Procuraduría General de la República) received 6,741 complaints of sex crimes. Of these, 1776 involved minors. Between January and May 2016, 896 crimes of this sort against minors were reported, a 20% increase from the previous year.

Raquel Casares, director of the NGO Plan República Dominicana, said child exploitation is especially common in tourist areas and along the Haitian border. There are no official statistics regarding the number of children subjected to commercial sexual exploitation, which means that the available information is based on estimates.

Casares said that in order to understand the scale of the problem, Plan República Dominicana carried out a survey among 405 young people between the ages of 15 and 24. It revealed disturbing findings: 96% of those surveyed were at risk of being sexually exploited for commercial gain; 45% of respondents knew at least two people of their age who had had sexual intercourse in exchange for money or gifts; 12% said they had had sexual intercourse in exchange for money, and 4% said they had had sexual intercourse in exchange for clothing and gifts.

A study carried out by the Misión Internacional de Justicia (International Justice Mission) in 2014 showed that one in 10 people involved in the sex trade in the Dominican Republic is a minor.

Casares acknowledges that the statistics in her organization's study are not representative of the country or the region, but she says they highlight a growing problem. Making the problem worse, the public prosecutor's office in charge of investigating cases of human trafficking launched only a handful of prosecutions for child prostitution and trafficking cases in 2015: 12 cases of child prostitution, one child pornography case, and one case of child trafficking.

"This means that despite the scale of the problem, barely any cases are being prosecuted," Casares said.

She said part of the problem is the country's legal framework, which contains a number of loopholes. For example, the civil code allows girls under 18 to marry with their parents' consent or the consent of a judge. But there is often a strong link between forced child marriages and sexual exploitation,

Casares said. The number of girls who get married under the age of 18 (37%) and under the age of 15 (12.5%), shows that poverty is the main factor that puts girls at risk, as child marriages have become a means of survival for girls trapped in poverty.

“One of the most common reasons why this happens is that families regard child marriages as an opportunity to negotiate their way out of poverty,” Casares said. “When a family discovers that one of their children is being sexually abused by an adult, they negotiate with that person in order to obtain goods, money, or property in exchange for not reporting the abuse to the authorities.”

To confront this situation, Plan República Dominicana launched a campaign with the slogan “18, not younger.”

### *Weak institutions*

Boca Chica is located just 40 km from Santo Domingo, the country’s capital, in a tourist area infamous for being a hub of clandestine child prostitution. The methods used are varied. Out on the street, young girls compete among each other for clients and there are individuals who belong to a web of “intermediaries” that offers tourists “anything they ask for.” Prostitution is disguised as massage services or women who braid hair, where the underage girl who models the hairstyles is being sexually exploited. According to Jessica Rosario, who works for a local NGO called Caminante, there is a chain of exploitation where each individual in the chain takes a small commission from those who pay to sexually exploit underage girls.

In 2013, the Spanish newspaper El País published an article about the different strategies used to cover up child prostitution. Once the tourist accepts the services offered, for example, a taxi driver takes him to the location where the young girl is being kept, and where intercourse takes place.

According to the Boca Chica authorities, it is common to see foreign tourists accompanied by underage local girls. The police turns a blind eye to the blatant abuse, and impunity reigns for both clients and child traffickers. In fact, between 2003 and 2011, only three individuals were prosecuted for child exploitation.

The gravity of the problem has raised concern among the Dominican authorities. In 2013, the Attorney General’s Office upgraded the status of the Public Prosecutor’s Unit Against Human Trafficking (Procuraduría Especializada en Tráfico Ilícito de Migrantes y Trata de Personas), turning it into a specialized unit in charge of prosecuting crimes related to child prostitution and sexual exploitation. By 2014, four individuals had been prosecuted and sentenced, and 54 cases are under investigation.

According to the unit’s director, Jonathan Baró, these statistics do not reflect the real scale of the problem.

“It is very difficult to fight this problem,” he said. “Young girls are in a state of total helplessness, and their predicament is very complex. Teenage pregnancy has reached alarming proportions—almost 25% of underage girls get pregnant—which means they get kicked out of their homes and risk falling prey to human traffickers or are forced to engage in prostitution.”

The Dominican Republic, a country of 10 million inhabitants, has five prosecutors for these crimes. Baró said a number of strategies have been implemented to tackle the problem, such as the creation of a hotline to report the sexual exploitation of children and the intermediaries who are paid to source tourists searching for this type of illegal activity. This has made it possible to rescue a number of girls who were being exploited and to arrest child traffickers. Additionally, the tourism police unit, which was previously more concerned with protecting tourists than preventing children from

being exploited, has been turned into a militarized unit, the Cuerpo Especializado de Seguridad Turística (Specialized Tourism Security Unit, CESTUR).

“Police agents were badly paid and badly trained and were not aware of the seriousness of these crimes,” said Caminante’s Rosario. “It was difficult for children to resort to the police because they were more likely to be subjected to extortion than to receive help.” Rosario said there is still much room for improvement, because the new police unit has inherited many bad practices from its predecessor.

For many women from low-income backgrounds, prostitution becomes an escape route. According to testimonies compiled by Caminante, a woman who services three or four clients a day can generate up to US\$2,200 a month, which is 10 times the minimum wage in the Dominican Republic. Most of the money, however, is usually pocketed by human traffickers.

### *Private efforts*

A number of companies, especially hotel chains, aware of the problem, have begun implementing policies in order to crack down on child trafficking and child prostitution, seeking to prevent their premises from being used to commit these crimes. The measures taken include forbidding adults from entering the premises accompanied by a minor, unless the guest can prove that he or she is the child’s parent or guardian, or reporting the incident to the authorities.

This means that tourism businesses no longer treat human traffic as a taboo topic. The corporate sector has realized that much needs to be done in terms of creating a culture in which witnesses report suspected crimes, as the victims themselves, or the tourists who are there to relax and want to stay away from trouble, will rarely come forward.

Organizations such as the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) are also trying to fight the reigning impunity surrounding the trafficking of minors.

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