

The Protection Project

Human Rights Report on Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children: A Country-by-Country Report on a Contemporary Form of Slavery: The Case of Cuba

Routes of Trafficking

Cuba is a country of origin and destination for women and children trafficked for the purpose of prostitution and other forms of sexual exploitation. Cuban women are trafficked to the United States, Europe and Costa Rica, and it is reported that Jamaican women are trafficked to Cuba.

Cuba is a popular destination country for sex tourists[1] from the United States, Canada and Europe.

Contributing Factors to the Trafficking Infrastructure

Cuba was once known as the “brothel of the Caribbean” due to its reputation as a haven for wealthy Americans looking for sex, gambling and wild night life. After the 1959 revolution, this element of Cuban society was drastically cleaned up.[2] Sex workers were offered housing, education and employment in order to assist them with rehabilitation into mainstream society.[3] Sex tourism is “back with a vengeance” now in Cuba.[4] Several factors have been noted for their contribution to the re-emergence of the sex tourism industry on the island. First, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the economic crisis that resulted left many Cubans suffering from a drastic decline in their standards of living.[5] Second, the promotion of foreign tourism to bring in hard currency fueled the growth of the dual dollar economy. In the 1990s, Cubans began to sell a range of goods and services to foreign tourists, including sex. Third, Cuba’s popularity as a foreign tourist destination grew, mainly due to “racialized stereotypes, low rates of HIV, and, quite simply, low cost.”[6] Finally, the government’s “initial attitude of general indifference to the activity” sent “a message to the global sex tourist community that Cuba was open for business.”[7]

Forms of Trafficking

Sex tourism has shifted to some Western Hemisphere countries, including the Dominican Republic, Honduras and Cuba.[8] Cuba is “increasingly developing a reputation as the hemisphere’s capital for sex tourism.”[9] However, no definitive data exist on the magnitude of the problem; rather, the assertion is based on anecdotal evidence and impressions of visitors to the island.[10] As one report describes: “As any visitor to the tourist areas on the island over the past several years can attest, sex tourism is not only present; it is a central facet of Cuba’s tourism industry.”[11]

Cubans refer to the girls who go with tourists as “jinteras.”[12] The beach resort of Varedero is a popular area for sex tourism, and adult and child prostitutes reportedly hang out there to pick up clients.[13] Young girls coming from the interior of the island to urban and tourist areas are the most vulnerable to exploitation, as they lack language and negotiating skills.[14] Child prostitutes are vulnerable to abuse by pimps and corrupt policemen. In Varedero such abuse is particularly common.[15]

It has been reported that Cuba is one of many countries that have replaced Southeast Asia as a destination for pedophiles and sex tourists.[16] This has been attributed to a concurrent drop in political restrictions on travel to Cuba and a crackdown on sex tourism in Southeast Asia, causing sex tourists to seek out alternative destinations.[17] Reports further indicated that Canadian and American tourists have contributed to a sharp increase in child prostitution and in the exploitation of women in Cuba.[18] Canadian sex tourism also is cited as largely responsible for the revival of Havana brothels and child prostitution.[19] A 53-year-old Canadian man was sentenced in July 2003 to 10 years in a Cuban jail for having sex with a 13-year-old girl. The accused claims the girl showed him an ID that proved she was 18. Cuban authorities rejected that claim. Another Canadian man was sentenced to 25 years in a Cuban jail for having a relationship with a 15-year-old girl. He maintains his innocence.[20]

Internet-based matchmaking organizations sell addresses of Cuban women to foreign men. One website, called “A Love in Cuba: Marriage Personals” answered frequently asked questions for interested males. For example, in responses to the question “Why do these women want to meet American and European men?”, the service offered the following answer: “In one thing ladies are the same than the rest of the women in the world, they dream with the opportunity to build a family, and seek personal and professional development, but unfortunately, Cuba is not the best place to do this. The Cuban economy is in horrible shape, and even education, professional women have no real opportunity to earn a decent income, (Obviously neither Cuban men). You represent everything the Cuban man is not, and these women are willing to move from their homeland to pursue a loving relationship and build a family with you.”[21]

There are also reports that young boys and men engage in “romance tourism” with North American and European women.[22] In such cases, usually well-off, single, professional women travel to resort areas and provide a willing male with drinks, dinners, shopping sprees, jewelry and other luxury goods in exchange for sex and companionship.[23]

Government Responses

Corruption of minors is prohibited. Anyone who induces a person of either sex under the age of 16 to engage in prostitution, or anyone who is present at a place where vice or acts of corruption are practiced is penalized by 2 to 5 years of imprisonment.²⁴ A person who learns that a minor, under his or her power, guardianship or care, is practicing prostitution, and consents to or does not impede such acts, or does not notify the proper authority of such acts, is liable for punishment.²⁵

[1] See generally, “Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children in the Countries of the Americas, A Report prepared by The Protection Project for IOM to be presented at the Hemispheric Conference on International Migration: Human Rights and Trafficking in Persons in the Americas, Santiago, Chile, 20 –22 November 2002.”

[2] “Castro makes rare comment on Cuban prostitution.” Reuters. 1 May 2001. From www.ecpat.net

[3] Michael Clancy. “The Globalization of Sex Tourism and Cuba: A Commodity Chains Approach.” *Studies in Comparative International Development*. Winter 2002. Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 63 – 88.

[4] Michael Clancy. “The Globalization of Sex Tourism and Cuba: A Commodity Chains

Approach.” *Studies in Comparative International Development*. Winter 2002. Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 63 – 88.

[5] Michael Clancy. “The Globalization of Sex Tourism and Cuba: A Commodity Chains Approach.” *Studies in Comparative International Development*. Winter 2002. Vol. 36, No. 4, p. 83.

[6] Michael Clancy. “The Globalization of Sex Tourism and Cuba: A Commodity Chains Approach.” *Studies in Comparative International Development*. Winter 2002. Vol. 36, No. 4, p. 83.

[7] Michael Clancy. “The Globalization of Sex Tourism and Cuba: A Commodity Chains Approach.” *Studies in Comparative International Development*. Winter 2002. Vol. 36, No. 4, p. 84. The author concludes, “The severity of the economic crisis, combined with the Cuban government’s aggressive promotion of foreign tourism fueled the growth of the dollarized economy in Cuba. By the mid-1990s ordinary Cubans, who possessed so little to sell in the first place, sold a range of goods and services to foreign travelers for dollars. Women selling sexual services are best understood within that context. Meanwhile, from a demand standpoint, Cuba quickly became an attractive destination. The novelty of Cuba, combined with racialized stereotypes, low rates of HIV, and quite simply, low cost made the island especially desirable.”

[8] Craig Pearson. “Sex tourists prey on poor.” *Windsor Star*. 26 July 2003.

[9] Michael Clancy. “The Globalization of Sex Tourism and Cuba: A Commodity Chains Approach.” *Studies in Comparative International Development*. Winter 2002. Vol. 36, No. 4, p. 63.

[10] Michael Clancy. “The Globalization of Sex Tourism and Cuba: A Commodity Chains Approach.” *Studies in Comparative International Development*. Winter 2002. Vol. 36, No. 4, pp. 63 – 88.

[11] Michael Clancy. “The Globalization of Sex Tourism and Cuba: A Commodity Chains Approach.” *Studies in Comparative International Development*. Winter 2002. Vol. 36, No. 4, p. 63.

[12] Craig Pearson. “Sex tourists prey on poor.” *Windsor Star*. 26 July 2003.

[13] ECPAT Cuba. From www.ecpat.net. Accessed 26 March 2004.

[14] ECPAT Cuba. From www.ecpat.net. Accessed 26 March 2004.

[15] ECPAT Cuba. From www.ecpat.net. Accessed 26 March 2004.

[16] Marwaan Macan-Markar, “New Effort to Protect Children from Vice,” *Inter Press Service*, 17 December 1999.

[17] Ian Burrell, “Sex Tourists Turn to the Caribbean,” *Independent*, 13 October 1998. See generally Daniel Edelson, “The Prosecution of Persons who Sexually Exploit Children in Countries other than their own: A Model for Amending Existing Legislation,” 25 *Fordham International L. J.* 483, 485 – 486 (2001), “when some destination countries more stringently enforce their laws against child sexual exploitation, child sex tourists shift their focuses to countries that protect children less rigorously.”

[18] Ian Burrell, “Sex Tourists Turn to the Caribbean,” *Independent*, 13 October 1998.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] Craig Pearson. “Sex tourists prey on poor.” *Windsor Star*. 26 July 2003.

[21] Quoted directly from website “A Love in Cuba: Marriage Personals.”

www.admiraluno.com/aloveincuba/faq.htm. 24 March 2004.

[22] ECPAT Cuba. From www.ecpat.net. Accessed 26 March 2004.

[23] Annan Boodram. “Sex Tourism.” *Caribbean Voice*. From www.caribvoice.org

[24] Criminal Code of Cuba, Law No. 62 of 1988, Article 310. “One who induces a person under 16 years of age, of either sex, to practice homosexuality or prostitution, or to be present at places where vice or acts of corruption are practiced, or to undertake any other unchaste act of those provided for in this code, shall be punished by imprisonment for two to five years.”

[25] Criminal Code of Cuba, Law No. 62 of 1988, Article 311. “Punishment shall be imprisonment for three months to one year or a fine of one hundred to three hundred quotas, or both, for one who having learned that a minor under his or her power, guardianship, or care is practicing any of the acts provided for in the previous article, consents or does not impede it, or does not make it known to the authorities; performs sexual acts in the presence of persons under 16 years of age.” According to the U.S. Department of State’s 2004 Trafficking in Persons Report, “The Cuban Government does not condone underage prostitution, but does not publicly address the problem, which largely takes place in the context of tourism that earns hard currency for the state. Cuba is a destination for sex tourists, including foreigners searching for underage prostitutes. Cuba’s tourist industry is heavily dominated by state companies, and government employees tolerate corrupt practices that facilitate this sexual exploitation, sometimes even making state-run facilities available for underage prostitution.” Cuba was placed on Tier 3 by the U.S. Department of State in 2004 and 2003. The 2003 Trafficking in Persons Report reported similar findings: “Minors are victimized in sexual exploitation connected to the state-run tourism industry. Despite occasional measures by the Government of Cuba to crack down on prostitution, state-controlled tourism establishments and independent operators facilitate and even encourage the sexual exploitation of minors by foreign tourists. Government authorities turn a blind eye to this exploitation because such activity helps to win hard currency for state-run enterprises...Over the years, the Cuban government has reversed its position regarding its condemnation of the prostitution that feeds sex tourism. There is no known law enforcement against traffickers who make available state-controlled public facilities for the sexual exploitation of minors.”