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Patricia Rodríguez González *

Girls trafficking for sexual exploitation purposes in Sierra Leone

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Girls trafficking for sexual exploitation purposes in Sierra Leone

Abstract:

Women and girls make up 94% of the world's victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. In Sierra Leone, as in the rest of the countries in the region, most of this type of trafficking occurs internally.

It is increasingly common to see girls as young as 11 or 12 years old selling their bodies in crowded clubs and areas, in the country's major cities and especially in the capital, Freetown.

It is such a normalized problem in the eyes of society that, despite the existent protective regulatory framework, neither the police nor the corresponding officials in the justice system act against traffickers, clients, pimps and intermediaries; turning the country into a paradise for paedophiles and unscrupulous people who use girls that are abandoned, abused and in miserable conditions, for their own benefit.

Only a few non-governmental organizations have raised their voices against this human drama with immeasurable consequences, not only for these girls, but for society as a whole.

Keywords:

Africa, trafficking, Sierra Leone, exploitation, pornography, trafficking, children, prostitution

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Introduction

Women and girls make up 94% of the world's victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation. West Africa is the area most affected by this scourge on the continent, where 31 per cent of trafficking is for sexual exploitation¹. In this context, and like in the rest of West Africa, Sierra Leone is a source and destination country for transnational trafficking. Many girls are taken to Mali, Niger, Gambia and, increasingly, Guinea for forced labour and prostitution². They are also sent to Gulf countries, Lebanon, America and Europe for the same purpose³.

However, this drama has its greatest scope within the country. Although there is not much scientific data collected, thanks to the work of the Child Heroes Foundation - together with Don Bosco Fambul - with sexually exploited girls, we have been able to verify its amplitude in the country and also the impunity of all those involved in this crime. Currently, Don Bosco Fambul has the only temporary shelter for this type of minors in the country. Since they began the work of recovering these girls in 2017, more than 470 have passed through the centre.

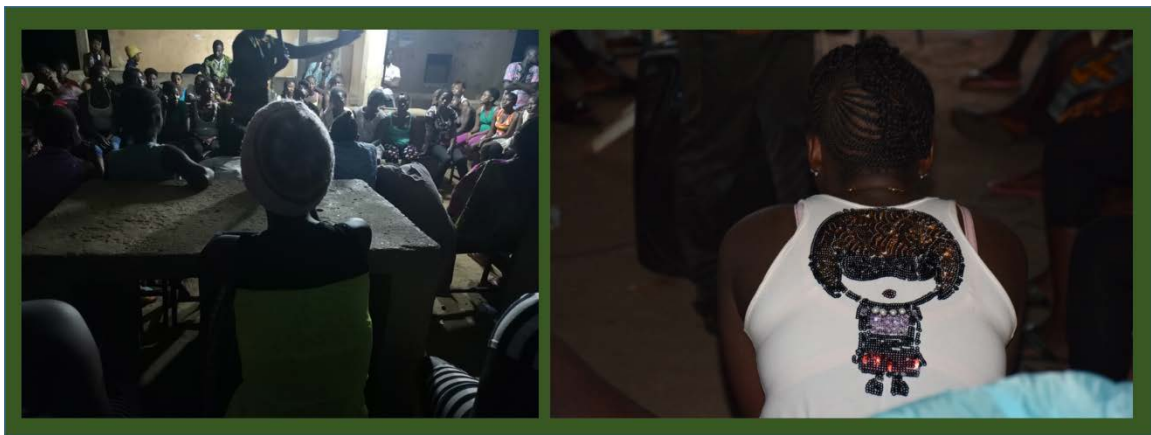


Figure 1. Don Bosco Fambul social workers meeting with sexually exploited girls in Freetown.

Source: Photography from the analysis author.

All this is happening in a country with very low social indicators and one of the worst Human Development Indexes (HDI) in the world, ranking 181st out of 189 countries

¹ UNODC. *Global report on trafficking in persons, 2018*. Available at:

http://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2018/GLOTiP_2018_BOOK_web_small.pdf

Last accessed on 13/04/2020

² Department of State. *Trafficking in persons report, june 2019*. Available at: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019-Trafficking-in-Persons-Report.pdf>

Last accessed on 13/04/2020

³ National Task Force on Trafficking in Persons. *The situation of human trafficking in Sierra Leone, 2017*

in 2019⁴. Despite having significant reserves of diamonds and other minerals, 53 per cent of the population lives below the poverty line⁵. And this endemic poverty - not only in economic but also in human terms - is the main factor that pushes thousands of girls into the streets, where they become victims of criminal trafficking networks.

This panorama is the result of a national history in permanent crisis: among the most recent, the 11-year war that ended in 2002 and the Ebola epidemic, eradicated in 2016. But, above all, it is a consequence of the omnipresent corruption that prevails at all administration levels and contaminates the whole society.

In this scenario, it is not surprising that child sexual abuse is widespread throughout the country. So much so that, after the rape of a five-year-old girl became public in February 2019, Sierra Leone's President Julius Maada Bio declared sexual abuse a national emergency and announced that the prosecution of the perpetrators of such crimes would be stepped up. To this end, the Sexual Offences Act 2012 was amended at the end of 2019 to introduce new aggravating circumstances and tougher penalties for rape, but not for the sexual exploitation of children.

This law and the general protection it provides is rarely applied to sexually exploited and trafficked girls.

Profile of girls trafficking in Sierra Leone

The reasons why girls in Sierra Leone end up selling their bodies in the streets generally originate in their own homes. They are often already victims of abuse, abandonment, neglect or extreme poverty within their families, long before they are trafficked.

Many girls start working as prostitutes in order to pay their school fees, for example, in Kono District (the main mining area of the country), where girls go to schools in the capital, Koidu. Parents send them with a relative or rent a room for them, leaving them only one bag of rice and some leaves a month. With almost nothing to eat, the girls are forced into prostitution. In addition, although enrolment in public school is free, they

⁴ United Nations Development Programme, HDR 2019.

⁵ Integrated Household Survey 2011 (the most recent one conducted). Available at: https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/33EF03BB-9722-4AE2-ABC7-AA2972D68AFE/Archives-2019/Global_POVEQ_SLE.pdf . Last accessed on 17/04/2020

have to pay for the uniform, books and the usual bribes required by teachers to get through the school year.

Sometimes it is their own parents or guardians who sell them in exchange for favors from another adult or to pay off a debt.

"Should I sleep without a condom with a man who has helped my family?"⁶

It is very easy for a child who has been abused within the family to end up whoring herself for a cell phone or a pair of shoes. This is not because of poverty, as some claim, they simply value themselves as they have been valued, in other words, the cause lies in a profound dehumanization of the society.

At other times, girls are orphaned, as premature deaths are common in the country due to the poor health system, repeated natural disasters, and pandemics such as Ebola, which decimated the population between 2014 and 2016.

There are fewer cases where the girl is sold directly by a relative to a pimp, although this does exist. Sometimes, in the rural areas, the girl is given to "an aunty" or "uncle" with the promise that he will provide them with education once in the city. The reality is different: she becomes a labour slave, or decides to escape and take refuge on the street, and that is when she is not directly caught on arrival by prostitution networks. There is no lack of cases also of "aunties" who ask the girls to go out on the streets to prostitute themselves in order to contribute to the food for the house or the rent.

For one reason or another, most of these girls found themselves on the street at one point in their lives, where they met another girl who told them her story and about a man or woman who would protect them in a safe place and with whom they could also earn money.

This is the case of Aminata: a friend took her to a bar when she was 13 years old and told her that when a man approached her asking: "How much", she had to answer: "20,000 Lions" (2 €)

In Sierra Leone, there are minors on the streets from the age of 9,⁷ although the average is between 14 and 17 years old.

⁶ Question asked by M.K. one of the minors recovered by the Don Bosco Fambul shelter in Freetown during a talk on sex education in July 2019.

⁷ Interview in Freetown to the pimp Daddy Canada in October 2017.

These pimps, who are either men or women, including some of the girls who become group leaders, have usually a room in which 6 to 15 girls live. They often have to take turns sleeping because they can't all fit in at the same time. They share everything - clothes, toothbrush, toiletries, even the same plate of food.



Figure 2. One of the houses where sexually exploited girls reside in Freetown.

Source: Photography from the analysis author.

Most have sexually transmitted diseases, HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, gonorrhea, syphilis, tuberculosis, etc.

Generally, the pimp seeks out clients (local or foreign), although sometimes it is the girls themselves who do so; having sex at the place decided by the pimp or the client. They can prostitute themselves with up to six men in a single night. The price is between 10,000 and 20,000 Leones (1 or 2 euros), depending on whether they use protection or not, although foreigners are usually more "generous".

Girls have to share their profits with pimps or other intermediaries, such as boatmen: men who pick up sexually exploited girls from the streets and take them to fishing boats (Chinese, Russian, Korean or Lebanese) that anchor in Freetown Bay by night. Once on board, they must consume drugs, alcohol and have relations with the crew. There are even testimonies of girls who claim to have been forced to have sex with dogs; and also, that have been video recorded naked or having sex.

"The Koreans want to sleep with us all night, the Chinese tell you to leave when they're done."⁸

⁸ Testimonies collected from girls in contact with Don Bosco Fambul (E.J., S.M., K.K., M.C.) between the ages of 15 and 17 still being sexually exploited in October 2019

Before they leave, they are paid with money or fish. Depending on the client's nationality, they can be paid from 5 to 100 USD, although a part is kept by the boatman who brings them back to the land. The boatmen are also the ones who either contact the girls directly to take them to the boats, or through their pimps. There are many places in Freetown where these small boats leave for the fishing boats, these include: behind the office of the SLPP (Sierra Leone People's Party), the *compound fishing of Moa Wharf*, Tripoli, the quay of Port Lokko or Mabila.⁹

But child trafficking is not exclusive to the capital city of Sierra Leone, as it is spread throughout the country. In fact, the areas identified by Don Bosco Fambul as those most affected by child prostitution in Sierra Leone are Freetown, Waterloo, Tombo, Grafton, Goderich, Pepel, Makeni, Bo, Kenema and Kono District, especially in the mining areas. However, in the capital, as it is the largest city in the country (it concentrates almost 40 per cent of the total population), it is common to see minors prostituting themselves in bars and pubs in the centre, restaurant and hotel areas such as Lumley Beach, Aberdeen - with a greater presence of foreigners - as well as in transporters' car parks, markets and even in petrol stations.

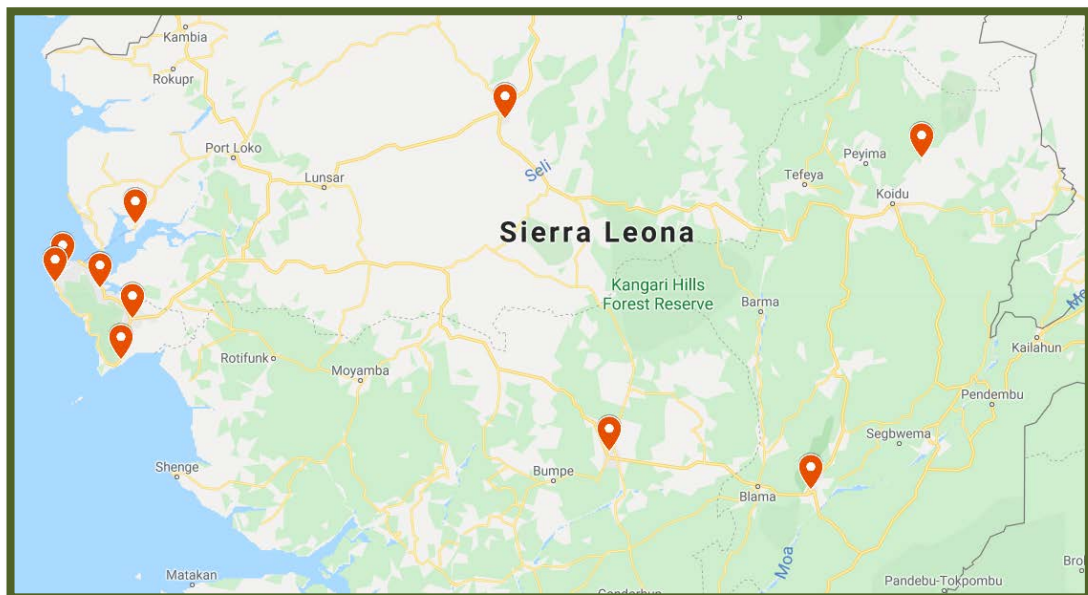


Figure 3. Main areas identified with the highest presence of sexually exploited children.
Source: Author of the analysis.

⁹ Ibid

Protection of victims and prosecution of child trafficking for sexual exploitation

Legislation

In Sierra Leone, the legal framework to prevent trafficking for sexual exploitation is very extensive. On the one hand, successive governments have ratified the main international instruments protecting women and girls against this social scourge:

1988: Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women

1990: The International Convention on the Rights of the Child

2000: Additional Protocol to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime on Trafficking in Persons, Women and Children

2001: Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography

2001: Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea and Air, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime

2001: Optional Protocol to the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment.

2002: African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child.

2011: Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour

2014: United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime

2014: Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime

Also, at the national level, the main regulations that punish these crimes are the Sexual Offences Act of 2012, amended in 2019, and the Anti-Human Trafficking Act of 2005.

For its part, the Sexual Offences Act prohibits any kind of sexual act with a minor. Specifically, it carries a maximum penalty of 15 years' imprisonment for:

- The production, distribution, publication, sale, exhibition, import and export of child pornography.
- Invite, facilitate, induce a minor to prostitution.
- Being a client of a minor in a situation of prostitution.
- Receive any type of financial or other reward for the prostitution of a minor
- To the parent, guardian or custodian who knowingly facilitates or permits the minor to engage in prostitution.
- The organization and promotion of child sex tourism.

In addition, the law establishes as aggravating factors the transmission of sexual diseases or getting the victim pregnant.

The Anti-Human Trafficking Act, determines that “A person engages in the trafficking in persons if he undertakes the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of persons, by means of the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation”. Such exploitation is defined, among other offences under the same precept, as prostitution or any other form of commercial sexual exploitation, including pimping and child pornography.

The police units in charge of protection

Despite the existence of these regulations, the reality is that the social consideration of this phenomenon, together with the endemic corruption at all society levels, hampers a real prosecution of this public and highly visible crime. In fact, there are testimonies of many girls who have been arrested by police officers who, after taking away the money obtained from clients, demand them to have sex in exchange for their release¹⁰.

The main division of the Police responsible for the protection of these girls is the *Family Support Unit* (FSU). This is a specialized unit attached to the police stations in Sierra Leone, with the mandate to investigate all forms of abuse and violence against children

¹⁰ Interviews conducted with several minors who are victims of sexual exploitation in Don Bosco Fambul between 2017 and 2019.

(sexual and physical abuse, exploitation, including sexual exploitation, as well as internal and cross-border trafficking). There are a total number of 75 units within the country.

In addition to the obvious unwillingness to prosecute these crimes, the FSU does not have the means either. The FSU only has 3 vehicles in the whole country. All files are kept on paper, so many are lost or destroyed. In the interior of the country, most police stations have no electricity and do not even have the budget to pay for generator fuel.

There are still many officers who do not have a thorough understanding of the laws related to children, especially the sexual offences act, how to complete cases, conduct investigations or collect evidence.

The collection of evidence is also hampered by medical costs, transport costs, etc. For example, there is only one laboratory in the country that does DNA testing and for it to be usable in a trial the price is USD 300.

Similarly, forensic certificates must be issued by a recognized physician from a public health center and must be issued free of charge in cases of sexual abuse. If the girl is engaged in prostitution, the sexual relations she has are not considered to be abusive by the medical corps or the police and therefore the examination, treatment and certificate are not free of charge. Without a medical certificate the case does not reach the Court.

Despite all these serious shortcomings, the major impediment indicated by the FSU to prosecute crimes, related to girls trafficking for sexual exploitation, is age¹¹. Girls consider their pimp as their protector and, in general and in return, they try to cover for him or her. They are on the street with nothing and no one, and that adult - who in the case of men also often abuses them - as well as their partners, becomes their only family. When the police ask them how old they are, they always say that they are 18 years old.

In this area, the Sexual Offences Act provides a defence for the perpetrator of offences relating to child pornography and sexual exploitation who *believe, on reasonable grounds, that the child was over 18 years of age at the time of the offence*. In addition, the Human Trafficking Act considers exploitation to exist, inter alia, where there is

¹¹ Interview T. Robin Mansaray, member of the Family Support Unit of the Sierra Leone Police

abuse of power, and this offence is considered to occur where the victim is a child under the age of 18.

On the other hand, many families do not register their children at birth, and there are cases where it is physically difficult to determine the age. Even if the police decide to go to the Civil Registration Office, it would be difficult to obtain data on the birth of a registered child.

Finally, beyond age, fear is another major impediment to the prosecution of these crimes: minors are afraid to testify against pimps or clients and there are no public or private means to provide them with effective protection.

Another special division of the police with the mission of protecting victims of trafficking is the Transnational Organized Crime Unit (TOCU). According to the U.S. State Department, this unit is not very active in addressing human trafficking for sexual exploitation purposes, despite the numerous reports of Sierra Leonean women being trafficked to Kuwait as victims of sex trafficking¹².

The judicial pursuit of children sexual exploitation

At the judicial level, corruption is the greatest impediment to the prosecution of this type of crime. Cases of alleged bribery of prosecutors and judges by traffickers have been reported: Judicial inefficiency, general corruption and delays in proceedings prevented the prosecution of traffickers in the courts, reducing confidence in the judicial system¹³. For one reason or another, the reality is that there have been no convictions in the country for child trafficking for sexual exploitation since 2011.¹⁴

In 2018, in an effort to improve the prosecution of trafficking offences, the judiciary designated Court No. 2 in Freetown as a specialized court to hear all cases of trafficking in persons; however, this action has not improved the outcome¹⁵.

Sierra Leonean law provides for a special procedure for child victims of crime in contact with the justice system. However, in the case of these girls, even the investigation

¹² Department of State. Trafficking in persons report, June 2019. Available in: <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019-Trafficking-in-Persons-Report.pdf>. Fecha de consulta 15/04/2020

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Ibid

¹⁵ Ibid

phase is not initiated. In the case of a minor there is no need for a prior report, the police can act ex officio. In the event that an investigation is opened or a pimp, trafficker or client is arrested, it is also easy for the victim or her family to accept money in exchange for their silence. In addition, if they are children living in the provinces or villages, they often cannot even afford to pay for transportation to court in order to testify.

As they are minors, they are supposed to be represented by the public prosecutor's office and supported by a social worker from the Ministry of Social Welfare. However, in practice, child victims of any crime are often called upon to testify in court, and face - in the presence of the accused - questions from defense lawyers, while only accompanied by their family or, if necessary, by social workers from the private protection institution who have no legal training¹⁶.

Prevention of girls trafficking for sexual exploitation purposes

With the Anti-Human Trafficking Act of 2005, the Government established the National Task Force on Trafficking in Persons - "TIP task force", to monitor and coordinate the implementation of the Act. It is composed of senior officers from the Ministries of Women and Children Affairs and Justice, the Attorney General's Office, the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, the Ministry of Information, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, the Ministry of Youth and Sports, Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Territorial Localities and Community Development, the Chief Immigration Officer or his representative, the Police Commissioner in charge of criminal services, a representative of the Ombudsman's office, a representative of the Women's Forum, the National Human Rights Forum, Don Bosco Fambul and World Hope International.

This group should have a database with a record of victims of trafficking passing through the system. In 2017, only 33 victims were registered and there were no convictions. It is therefore obvious that child prostitution within the country is not considered as trafficking despite what is established by the law. Moreover, the National Action Plan Against Trafficking in Persons ends in 2020 and has never been given a budget for its implementation.

¹⁶ Reality of the minors in the Don Bosco Fambul protection shelters.

Among the few advances in this field, the Ministry of Children and Women Affairs (before Ministry of Social Welfare, Women and Children's Affairs) has participated in some prevention, awareness and advocacy campaigns, organized and financed by civil society organizations such as World Hope International and Don Bosco Fambul. In 2017, some specific training actions were carried out. Among them, those promoted by private entities such as Defense for Children International for agents in the frontiers; and other workshops financed by the United States Embassy in Sierra Leone for the training of researchers on issues related to trafficking. However, no specific training has been conducted for police, officials and government bodies responsible for preventing, protecting and combating trafficking in sexually exploited children.

In conclusion, and despite the declaration of the aforementioned national emergency in 2019, no state funding has been allocated to implement the measures announced by President Maada Bio, such as free medical assistance for all child victims of sexual abuse. Only in April 2020, line 116 relating to the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs (new Ministry, created after the splitting of the Ministry of Social Welfare in December 2019), for cases of rape, has started to operate, leaving out child prostitution. For all other cases of violence against children, the only child helpline in the country is 323, which is run by Don Bosco Fambul and financed by private donations.

In short, to date the Government has made no real effort to prevent child trafficking for sexual exploitation. The measures taken seem to aim at satisfying donors and calming public opinion.

Consequences of girls trafficking for sexual exploitation

The abuse of a child forced into prostitution can trigger the worst and most destructive mental health disorders. These include post-traumatic stress, anxiety, or suicide attempts, but vary depending on life stage. As a more generalized pattern, these girls may suffer from depression, personality disorder, eating disorders, problems in handling emotions (aggressiveness), hatred and mistrust of adults, lack of self-esteem, early sexual relations, lack of social and communication skills and above all, stigma and marginalization. Many times, the way to show affection is much sexualized because they need and seek recognition or attention and do not know any other way to ask for it.

If we talk about the physical consequences, many die of HIV/AIDS, hepatitis, tuberculosis and practically all suffer from STDs such as gonorrhea, syphilis, vaginal warts etc. Therefore, child prostitution is not only a human problem, but also a public health problem. Since most relationships are unprotected, it is the major source of spread of diseases among the male population who, in turn, infect their partners.

These girls have not received any sex education, a culturally taboo subject in families and at school. Some, as young as 17, believe that babies grow up in the stomach:

"- How do you protect yourself? -When the client is done, I jump in to drop everything. -¹⁷

That way, many get pregnant. Some of them give birth, but they take care of their children with considerable difficulties: they are children, they have never received the affection and care of a family; and they do not know how to offer it either. Others die from infections caused by unsafe abortions and unlicensed medical advice. And the situation is not better for the children of these minors, since many dies, others end up abandoned in the street and the lucky ones end up in a shelter.

Finally, some girls become pimps, or they become so as adults. In this way, they enlist other girls in this miserable life, as they know no other; and thus, they become perpetrators and amplifiers of this serious human problem.

Conclusion and recommendations

As we have stated, in Sierra Leone, child trafficking for sexual exploitation is neither prosecuted nor punished.

In general, and outside legal considerations, many think that these girls engage in prostitution voluntarily, without regard for or interest in their living context. For most of them, social, family and economic conditions have cornered them in such a way that they feel they have no other choice in life. The fight to eradicate such widespread and socially permitted child prostitution is certainly not an easy task, but neither is it impossible. To achieve this, it is necessary to work from different angles.

¹⁷ Interview with J.M. (child victim of sexual exploitation) in Susan Bay, Freetown in October 2017

The first must focus on the application of the law:

- Many times, not even the FSU agents know that these crimes are prosecutable. For this reason, the continuous training of the agents responsible for ensuring the protection of these girls is indispensable for them to be able to act efficiently.
- In addition, the police must have the necessary means, including vehicles, equipment and the number of officers required to carry out investigations, collect sufficient evidence and arrest the perpetrators.
- Finally, corruption has been, is and will be the greatest impediment to the protection of these girls, so fighting it should become a priority for the Government.

The second focus should be to foster the necessary conditions for girls to be able to report the crime and to improve judicial processes:

- Reporting by girls is one of the greatest difficulties, as they do not feel safe, are not protected and are suspicious of police. To change this situation, girls must first feel protected against revenge from pimps and even from gangs to some extent. To do this, temporary protection shelters should be set up in secret and remote locations.
- While the trials last, minors must always be protected by the police. In addition, it is necessary to shorten the procedural delays which, in cases of sexual abuse, can last up to three years.
- On the other hand, since the prostitution of minors is a crime only when they are under 18 years of age, it is essential to seek out families to find out if these girls have a birth certificate or, in general, to systematically register all of them, including those who are still living on the street.

Finally, the third front is society itself:

- According to the professionals who work with these girls, one solution is to raise awareness in the communities where the girls work, for them to denounce clients and pimps. To this purpose, it is essential to carry out mass awareness campaigns; to disseminate the content of the laws; to raise awareness of the situation and the risks suffered by these girls; and, finally, to inform them of the public health problems that sexual exploitation entails for society as a whole.

- It is also necessary to involve hoteliers, hotel managers and club owners to prevent pimps and customers from entering their premises with these girls, although this part is more difficult, because some receive income from these practices and others prefer to turn a blind eye, as the presence of these girls attracts customers.

At the end, action must be taken at government level, because it is both striking and regrettable that neither the Ministry for Women's and Children's Affairs nor any child protection agency or institution has so far conducted a study on the situation of child trafficking for sexual exploitation in the country, despite its enormous visibility. Nevertheless, it is essential to study in depth the origins, causes and extent, as well as the serious repercussions that this child drama has on society as a whole. All these aspects must be the basis for developing accurate and concrete strategies and actions to eradicate it, because thousands of girls in Sierra Leone, victims of the most execrable crime against children, deserve a different future and it is incumbent on the state that it assumes its obligation to guarantee it.

Author's note:

Child Heroes is a Spanish Foundation dedicated to the protection and promotion of human rights, especially of the most vulnerable children.

Don Bosco Fambul is a Sierra Leonean NGO belonging to the Salesians of Don Bosco dedicated to the protection, rehabilitation and reintegration of street children, victims of abuse and sexual exploitation.

Both entities collaborate since 2017 in projects to get girls in prostitution off the streets, train them and help them start a new life in Sierra Leone.

More information: childheroes.org

*Patricia Rodríguez González**
Analyst and Director of Child Heroes