

# Children and the sex tourism trade: Awareness training for media professionals

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## Introduction

Much media coverage of what is euphemistically called 'child sex tourism' runs the risk of pandering to prurient interest, relying heavily on sensational styles of presentation and portraying children as innocent, helpless victims. If investigative journalism is to 'make a difference' it has to go beyond superficial stories that merely establish the 'fact' that children are being sexually abused.

There are many different journalistic angles to the sexual exploitation of children by 'tourists':

- the economic circumstances which underpin the trade in children as sexual objects – including poor wages and lack of organisation among hotel staff who act as pimps;
- the local and international legal sanctions to prosecute abusers;
- the sexual proclivities of those who abuse children;
- the criminal networks through which the trade is conducted;
- the stories of the children themselves - including the rescue and recovery programmes for those who survive abuse.

However if media professionals are to report about the commercial sexual exploitation of children with appropriate sensitivity, they need more than just an understanding of the causes. They also need to *appreciate* children's rights and the consequences of their own output.

Journalists wishing to produce comprehensible accounts of systematic corruption need to become familiar with the legal, social and economic circumstances in which it flourishes. They need to consider what protective measures may be necessary both for their informants and themselves.

When embarking upon such assignments, media professionals – researchers, writers, photographers, camera operators, editors – have to take special care about confidentiality, keeping copies of evidence in a safe place and ensuring at the very least that someone 'back at base' is aware about the progress of the investigation. Freelances working on such investigations need to be treated as an integral part of the team. Everyone involved should be prepared for the aftermath, including possible litigation and the emotional trauma associated with exposing the physical and sexual abuse of children. This is especially important when dealing with children whose lives may be at risk.

It should be axiomatic that such measures are taken care of by any media organisation wishing to undertake a serious investigation, and that best use is made of the advice and contacts of the most experienced colleagues.

### **What kind of training?**

Awareness training targeted at working journalists can help them to recognise that children's rights are important and to reflect upon the special responsibility they carry when representing children's stories. It can give them the confidence to address common 'newsroom dilemmas' with a fresh approach to the ethics of their trade.

The training approach described here does not set out to impose standards or ready-made solutions. It is designed by working journalists to inspire colleagues to develop practical strategies for dealing with complex issues, and establish their own 'codes of conduct' to inform coverage of stories about the abuse of children.

If such training is to be effective, it must assist media professionals to strike an appropriate balance between the protection of children's rights and journalistic independence and freedom of expression.

On most basic vocational or in-service training courses, ethical issues are addressed rarely and may only arise tangentially. Children's rights are even less likely to feature, except insofar as they are reflected in the law and regulations governing reporting of children in the care of public authorities or involved in court cases.

Innovative training methods pioneered by the UK-based media ethics charity The PressWise Trust have demonstrated that media professionals handle stories involving children quite differently once they are introduced to the broader issue of children's rights and their status in society.

PressWise has carried out research and run training courses for journalists on children's rights and the media in Africa, Asia, Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and Latin America, in conjunction with the International Federation of Journalists and UNICEF.<sup>1</sup>

The Trust has concluded that awareness training leads to higher ethical standards. It encourages media professionals to rethink the way they handle stories involving children. They begin to approach children with more sensitivity, appreciating the value of listening to young people and providing space for their views and opinions. One result is portrayal that avoids stereotyping and condescension.

Such training can also assist in resolving some of the conflicting pressures faced by journalists covering stories about abused children. Sensational stories exploiting the emotional appeal of these children may attract larger headlines, but they distort a serious social issue and fail to respect young people's dignity.

**What type of trainers?**

Crucial to the success of such training is the use of working journalists, or journalism trainers with extensive practical experience of covering stories about children at risk, to devise the content and format of training modules and to lead the training sessions.

Experienced, working journalists bring authority and credibility to awareness training which might otherwise be dismissed by media professionals as an attempt to tell them how to do their job. They are used to working under pressure. They understand and appreciate the legal, political, professional and commercial constraints that make it hard to balance sensitive and responsible reporting with the demands of strict deadlines and a competitive working environment. Their involvement is an especially helpful way of engaging mid-career colleagues in the issue of children's rights.

**Training style**

Media professionals are naturally sceptical, so awareness training cannot be a didactic affair. Instead it is a process of exploration that challenges assumptions and conventional production techniques by stimulating debate rather than prescribing solutions.

The trainers need to be 'skills sharers' who facilitate rather than lecture. Their strategy should be to encourage the free exchange of information and experiences, with an emphasis on a co-operative rather than a competitive approach to problem-solving.

That means they also need to be open-minded and open to challenge themselves, and prepared to acknowledge the difficulties and dilemmas they have themselves faced when covering stories about children.

This 'informal' approach works most effectively when participation is limited to no more than 20 people who can be split into four or five smaller, multi-disciplinary or medium-specific, working groups for the practical exercises. Where possible the setting should reflect workplace conditions, and seating arrangements should avoid the formal layout associated with the classroom or boardroom.

### **Course structure and content**

Much depends upon the circumstances under which such training can be delivered. What follows assumes that participants are available for at least one very full day. A long weekend away from the workplace would be ideal, or an opportunity for the same group to come together on two separate days, without too long a time-lapse.

It is helpful to begin with short introductory sessions to encourage participation, and get journalists to identify **the basic needs of children** and the extent to which they differ from those of adults.

A simple oral quiz about **the status of children in society** will allow journalists to test and share their knowledge. It will also provide opportunities to discuss the role of the media in highlighting shortcomings, ambiguities and contradictions in the way the state and public authorities have responded to their obligations under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. [All but the USA and Somalia have signed the convention.]

Topical examples of good and bad practice from the print and broadcast media could be displayed alongside existing **professional codes of conduct and guidelines**, media regulations and the IFJ Guidelines and Principles for Reporting on Issues Involving Children.<sup>ii</sup>

This should spark lively discussion on the legal and ethical implications of **media portrayals of children**. How far can voluntary codes and guidelines work under professional working conditions? How effective can they be in minimising the harm done to vulnerable young people?

In the context of children's rights and 'sex tourism' the **legal and ethical issues** to be debated would include: -

- identification;
- permission to photograph or film;
- privacy;
- defining 'the public interest';
- confidentiality and protection of sources;
- undercover investigation methods;
- the media's relationship with law enforcement agencies;
- access to official sources;
- use of official and non-official sources - including the Internet.

Participants can be invited to **share examples of good practice** that tell children's stories accurately, fairly and non-sensationally but still have market appeal.

Trainers should also encourage **discussion of gender and cultural issues** as they relate to children, and **challenge myths and stereotypes** surrounding media portrayal of children, particularly those from minority groups and countries where sexual abuse of children by tourists occurs.

Participants could then be divided into working groups for a selection of practical 'case studies' that reflect everyday working conditions. Role-play exercises could re-enact real-life 'newsroom dilemmas'. Groups should be prepared to defend, and perhaps reconsider, the results of their deliberations in front of the full seminar.

The following topics are among those that lend themselves to this approach:

- **Images of children** - how do we take and use striking images of children while at the same time respecting their human dignity?
- **Interviewing children** - what special skills are needed to collect reliable information from vulnerable children about their feelings and experiences without abusing their trust or putting them at risk?
- **HIV/AIDS** - where do the myths come from, and how can media professionals assist children to appreciate the facts?

- **Stereotypes** – to what extent does the media perpetuate gender and cultural stereotypes about children, particularly in developing countries? What sort of coverage would challenge these attitudes?
- **Alternative sources** – how can we build reliable relationships of mutual trust with non-governmental organisations (NGOs)?

One especially important aspect of the awareness training should focus on **the 'voice' of children**. Time should be devoted to discussing how media professionals can give children the chance to speak about their lives and to express their own views freely. Too often the right of children to be heard is ignored, preventing their perspective from reaching the public and decision-makers. They can deliver fresh insights on issues that affect them – not least on the way they are represented in the media.

Particular attention should be paid to techniques for **interviewing children**. Participants could be encouraged to share their experiences and draw up their own recommendations for successful engagement with young people.

Face-to-face interviews with vulnerable children can raise the issue of **identification and confidentiality**, so journalists need to think of compelling alternative ways of telling a child's personal story and representing them visually.

In their workgroups, participants could devise practical ways of **helping young people to participate in the media**, for instance through children's magazines, consumer programmes or radio workshops and web-sites.

And finally the training course should allow time for participants to list and evaluate their own **practical strategies for dealing with children's issues** in the future.

**Who could benefit from this training?**

It is important for media professionals everywhere to become far more aware of children's rights, given the all-embracing role the media plays in the lives of children in both the developed and the developing world.

Ethical training needs to take place on basic vocational training courses as well as within mid-career, in-service training. Pressure for such training needs to come from those working within the industry – especially through their unions and professional associations – rather than just from agencies working with children.

Colleges and universities preparing would-be journalists and programme-makers for the job market concentrate almost exclusively on practical skills. They rarely touch on issues of child protection and participation, except in reference to legal restrictions on the reporting or photographing of children. Course leaders need to be persuaded to attach more importance to ethical matters and to allocate more time and attention to analysing and debating issues such as coverage of children and their rights.

Media organisations can be persuaded to support short, work-based awareness training if it is seen to foster good journalism, well-informed newsroom debate, and a better relationship with younger readers, viewers and listeners.

Mid-career, in-service training strategies should not be aimed solely at news and current affairs journalists and broadcasters. Media executives, programme directors, travel writers, fashion editors and sports reporters all need alerting to the importance of treating children's issues more sensitively. Specialist courses on the use of children's images should be run for photographers, camera operators and picture editors.



### **Working with industry bodies and NGOs to expose 'child sex tourism'**

Journalists are well aware that the public relations departments of commercial organisations seek to put the most favourable gloss on stories concerning them. Similarly, NGOs wanting to raise their public profile will approach the media with stories that justify their existence and funding.

Awareness of children's rights helps media professionals to temper their scepticism with sensitivity when dealing with campaigns and stories involving vulnerable children. It should also help them to appreciate the anxieties of children's organisations and other agencies about the motives of journalists who approach them for information and contacts, often at short notice and with little explanation.

Training strategies should assist media professionals to develop new ways of entering into dialogue with NGOs and other agencies. If they appreciate that the best interests of the children concerned must come first, it is possible to build trusting (but not uncritical) alliances which do not compromise their independence.

Personal relationships are the key to successful collaboration when tackling potentially problematic issues like 'child sex tourism'. If journalists are to play their part in the process of eradicating commercial sexual exploitation of children, they need the factual information and real-life stories that such agencies can provide. Those who work with children need to know they can trust their media contacts absolutely if they are to divulge sensitive information without immediately putting children at risk.

Media professionals must be prepared to enter into honest discussion about the likely consequences of publicity. And they must negotiate guarantees of anonymity where identity is an issue if they are to gain access to children and other protagonists willing to tell their story in their own words

They are ideally placed to help non-media bodies to understand how the industry operates. They can advise them on how to compile and present background information - facts, quotes and contacts - that will enable different sections of the media to engage their different audiences.

By the same token NGOs working with children can play an invaluable role in encouraging children's participation in the media. Through their relationships with media professionals they can develop projects that assist children to present their own stories and perspectives - through children's radio or animation workshops, for instance or the production of newsletters and websites. These can become stories in themselves, but also useful vehicles through which children can present their lives and views to the world.

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<sup>i</sup> *Examples of such training modules, produced by The Presswise Trust, are available free in English, Czech, French and Spanish on [www.presswise.org.uk](http://www.presswise.org.uk)*

<sup>ii</sup> *The International Federation of Journalists' Draft International Guidelines for Reporting on Children can be accessed at [www.ifj.org](http://www.ifj.org)*