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‘Sex tourism’ present in every country in the world  
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**The extent and nature of Sexual Exploitation of Children in Travel and Tourism (SECTT) has increased drastically, with more children being sexually exploited than ever before, new research has revealed.**

A global study by ECPAT international – a network dedicated to protecting children from all forms of commercial sexual exploitation – determined that no region is untouched by this crime and no country is ‘immune’.

It also stresses that there is no longer a ‘typical’ victim for these crimes and the only aspect they have in common is vulnerability.

The study, published on Thursday (May 12) to mark the 20th anniversary of the 1st World Congress on the Sexual Exploitation of Children, concludes that while some people committing SECTT are paedophiles, most are not.

It noted that most offenders are local, domestic, and intraregional travellers, with many being “situational” wrongdoers i.e. they engage in child exploitation because of an opportunity or because they feel they will get away with it.

The research, which was funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Netherlands, is critical that little is known about what types of SECTT – once known as sex tourism – are happening and where, including information on victims and perpetrators, and what actually works to stop the abuse.

It was guided by a taskforce, with members drawn from a wide range of expertise and

backgrounds, including governmental, non-governmental and the private sector.

ECPAT noted that prior to the report's publication, a lack of solid information about SECTT, coupled with silence or even tolerance, has kept the crime far too low on the policy agenda.

Dr Najat Maalla M'jid, Chair of the taskforce for the Global Study on SECTT, said everyone must take responsibility for ending the practice.

"It is a moral obligation to act now to protect all children from this shocking crime wherever they are," she said.

"In the last 20 years international tourist arrivals have grown from 527 million to 1.135 billion annually, providing significant financial gain for most of those involved. Even the most remote parts of the planet are now visited. Yet, with this increase in global travel comes greater risk for children."

Some of the main findings from report include:

- The internet and mobile technology have fuelled the increase in SECTT by creating new pathways for exploitation and reinforcing anonymity of offenders;
- Some victims, particularly ethnic minorities, those from a lesbian, gay or transgender background and street children, are more vulnerable than others;
- Services for victims remain inadequate across large chunks of the globe;
- Enforcement and prosecution of offenders is hindered by a lack of coordination and information sharing between authorities; and
- There are alarmingly low conviction rates for the sexual exploitation of children, which means the majority of offenders evade justice.

The research identified that SECTT has become far more complex, involving not only tourists but business travellers and migrant/transient workers, as well as large numbers of domestic travellers.

It highlighted that distinctions between countries of origin and countries of destination are blurring with terms such as 'country of origin', 'destination' or 'transit' becoming rapidly outdated as countries can be any, or even all three of these at different times.

"Reversing the power balance between offenders and victims is beyond the scope of any one law institution or country. These often hidden child victims need urgent help and real alternatives to build their future," the report said.

"Most, if not all, countries have laws in place that should – at least in theory – protect children against sexual exploitation. Their enforcement, however is hampered by a clear global definition of SECTT mirrored in national legislation, leaving police forces unsure about whether or how to

prosecute.

“One size fits all approaches cannot hope to protect children against SECTT and that global prevention and response measures must be tailored to a specific domestic situation to be effective.”

ECPAT provided a new definition of SECCT – Acts of sexual exploitation embedded in travel, tourism or both – and made a number of recommendations that it hopes will go some way to eradicating the issue.

They include:

- Converting the UN World Tourism Organisation’s Code of Ethics into an international convention with worldwide ratification;
- Taking into account the issue of sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism in the implementation, monitoring and reporting on the UN 2030 sustainable development goals;
- Creating reporting systems in every country so that children and others may report the incidences without fear of reprisal;
- Working with online service providers to remedy the growing sale of children for sex via the internet;
- Building an effective, proactive global system for law enforcement agencies to share information regarding offenders; and
- Expanding, and where required creating, care and support services for victims.

The study found similarities in regions across the globe, including the diversification of travel and tourism into remote parts of the world and increased use of mobile technologies to enable the crime. However, it found that each region faces its own particular challenges.

### **East Asia**

SECTT appears to be dominated by Asian men. Business travel is increasingly accompanied by the rise of a corporate culture involving participation in after-hours ‘meetings’ characterised by alcohol and sex.

The report highlighted that inconsistency surrounding laws and definitions of consent undermine the coordination and collaboration necessary to convict offenders.

### **Europe**

There are suggestions that children’s vulnerability to SECTT is on the rise. The report identifies that Western European countries, which have long been sources of travelling child sex offenders, are now destinations.

In particular countries in central and eastern Europe are emerging as source and destination countries – as they often lack the laws to protect children that exist elsewhere in the region.

It highlighted that while law enforcement has adopted measures to enhance protection against child sexual exploitation, few address SECTT specifically.

### **Latin America**

In Latin America the incidence of SECTT is very high, particularly in tourist areas near poor and excluded communities.

Several countries and many households in the region depend on revenue from tourism, which dramatically increases the risk of SECTT and discourages reporting and the enforcement of relevant laws.

### **Middle East and North Africa**

The region faces specific challenges that heighten the risk of SECTT, including conflict, wealth disparity, migration, the low status of women and girls and traditions such as child marriages.

While countries have laws against CSE, some still criminalise victims and the region lacks harmonised laws, allowing offenders to escape from one jurisdiction to another.

### **North America**

Canada and the USA are source countries for offenders and, increasingly, destinations. Neither country maintains reliable data on SECTT, but there are signs that children are becoming involved at a younger age and that some engage in commercial sex for survival. Indigenous children are at particular risk.

It identified that a vast travel and tourism infrastructure is exploited by offenders, while traffickers supply child victims to meet the demand of business travellers attending conferences.

The internet is also widely used to plan crimes and advertise victims.

### **Pacific**

While Australia and New Zealand have well-established tourism and travel sectors and laws on CSE, the Pacific island countries (PICs) are emerging destinations where awareness of the risks of SECTT and laws to address the crime are largely lacking.

Children from indigenous communities seem particularly affected by the crime in Australia and New Zealand, while the mining, logging and fishing industries in PICs are a particular hotspot.

### **South Asia**

Vulnerable boys tend to be involved in street-based sexual exploitation, while girls tend to be victimised in brothels and other sex venues.

Booming access to mobile technology and the massive expansion of travel and tourism infrastructure, alongside a continuing lack of social safety nets, consistent definitions and effective legislation and enforcement means few offenders fear punishment and few victims receive the support they need.

### **South East Asia**

Traditional destinations such as Thailand and the Philippines still attract travelling child sex offenders, while Cambodia, Indonesia and Vietnam are becoming key destinations and Myanmar is at risk as it opens up to tourists.

Regional focus has long been on foreign tourists, however ECPAT concluded that male nationals account for the vast majority of offenders.

It was also critical that no country has a specific action plan or agency to tackle SECTT.

### **Sub Saharan Africa**

The study found that SECTT may be increasing in this area, but high quality data is lacking. It noted that children are at highest risk in remote areas where traditional norms such as child marriage still operate.

By [Chris Allen](#)