

Brazil's child sex trade thrives as World Cup looms

December 03, 2013 | Adriana Brasileiro | Reuters

December 03, 2013

chicagotribune.com

FORTALEZA, Brazil (Reuters) - With Brazil hosting the World Cup next year, officials fear an explosion in child prostitution as sex workers migrate to big cities and pimps recruit more underage prostitutes to meet the demand from local and foreign soccer fans.

"We're worried sexual exploitation will increase in the host cities and around them," said Joseleno Vieira dos Santos, who coordinates a national program to fight the sexual exploitation of children at Brazil's Human Rights Secretariat.

"We're trying to coordinate efforts as much as we can with state and city governments to understand the scope of the problem."

Child prostitution is driven mostly by local demand in Brazil, with more than 75 percent of clients coming from the same or nearby states as their victims, according to estimates from the secretariat. Sex tourism targeting children is active in larger cities along the coast and increases at times of big events such as Carnival or New Year's Eve festivities.

It won't be different with the World Cup, and authorities face a big challenge as sex workers of all ages, and the people who control them, look to cash in.

The Minas Gerais State Association of Prostitutes, an organization that represents sex workers in one of Brazil's largest states, is even offering free English lessons to prostitutes in Belo Horizonte, another World Cup host city.

"There'll be a lot more people circulating in this area during the games for sure and the city will be full of tourists," said Giovana, a 19-year-old transvestite working a corner near Fortaleza's Castelão stadium.

"I know there'll be more work for everybody - women, girls, everybody."

BIG BUCKS

The World Cup tournament is expected to attract 600,000 foreign visitors to Brazil and they will spend an estimated 25 billion reais (\$11 billion) while travelling in the country, said the Brazilian tourism board, Embratur.

The championship as a whole could inject 113 billion reais into the Brazilian economy by 2014, FIFA has said, citing an Ernst & Young report.

For its part, Brazil's government will have spent 33 billion reais on stadiums, transport and other infrastructure by the time the tournament kicks off, plus \$10 million on advertising.

In contrast, very little is being spent on fighting the sexual exploitation of minors, campaigners say.

Despite more than a decade of government vows to eradicate child prostitution, the number of child sex workers in Brazil stood at around half a million in 2012, according to the National Forum for the Prevention of Child Labor, a network of non-profit groups.

That's a big increase since 2001, when 100,000 children worked in the sex trade, according to UNICEF estimates.

The Human Rights Secretariat earmarked 8 million reais for World Cup host cities to set up projects to fight child prostitution, but not all cities had programs in place to absorb the funds, said Santos.

Santos' department is finishing a review of child prostitution in key locations and will then decide what action to take. But any programs will only scratch the surface.

"We realize we're only touching the tip of the iceberg with these actions for the World Cup, but we hope to build capacity and implement longer-lasting programs in the future," he said.

Beyond the Human Rights Secretariat, the government could not provide data on total spending to fight child prostitution. But campaigners say some programs have been shut down and they argue the government isn't doing enough to address the problem.

"This subject isn't really part of the government's agenda and we don't see a willingness to combine efforts or increase resources to address the sexual exploitation of children," said Denise Cesario, executive manager of Funda o Abrinq, a local partner of Save the Children International.

THE LURE OF FORTAZELA

Sex tourism happens across Brazil but Fortaleza - a top tourist destination with sandy white beaches and 300 days a year of guaranteed sunshine - is the industry's main hub.

A culture of machismo, combined with extreme poverty and drug use, has created the perfect environment for sexual exploitation, say social workers like Cec lia dos Santos G is, who works at children's rights charity Cedeca.

In the poor and arid outskirts of Fortaleza, it's culturally acceptable for fathers to sell their daughters into the sex trade as a source of income, G is said.

More phone calls are made from Fortaleza to a nationwide toll-free number to report child sexual exploitation than from any other Brazilian city on a per capita basis, experts say.

While international sex tourism is prominent in Fortaleza, it represents only a third of all reported child prostitution cases. Prostitutes with Brazilian clients, from Cear  or surrounding states, are far more common, prosecutors said.