

Brazil's child sex trade thrives as World Cup looms

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Many of Fortaleza's young sex workers see prostitution as a way of escaping their circumstances. Jessica, 16, a tall brunette with thin plucked eyebrows and baby blue nail polish, began sex work with local clients, earning about \$18 a night, before graduating to bigger nightclubs and groups of foreign tourists for about \$90 a night.

Police arrested her in a September raid on a club on Iracema beach, the epicentre of Fortaleza's sex trade. They took her to one of four shelters for underage prostitutes, a discreet two-story house, accessible only through a narrow iron gate watched around the clock by security guards.

WAITING FOR A PRINCE

Sitting in the small room she shares with three younger girls, Jessica said one of her regular clients, a Spaniard, had promised to take her to Europe.

"I told him I was 18 and I was getting my passport," she said, tucking a rainbow-coloured tank top into green and yellow tropical-print stretch pants. "I paid 500 reais for a fake ID and was saving money to buy a fake passport. But in the end I was afraid to go."

Pimps and clients are rarely punished and when prosecutors do manage to build a case, victims often change their testimony and the cases are thrown out, said Francisco Carlos Pereira de Andrade, a prosecutor specializing in child exploitation.

Of the 2,000 cases before his department, which only handles sexual violence against children, only about 20 involve child prostitution.

The face of sex tourism in Fortaleza is also changing, making it more difficult to catch criminals, Andrade said.

Instead of working the streets, organized rings of pimps, hotel managers and taxi drivers recruit young girls. Foreign clients order the underage prostitutes and they are delivered directly to their hotels, Andrade added.

Vanessa was 13 when police picked her up in October not far from the stadium and took her to the same shelter as Jessica.

She left her home in a poor neighbourhood when she was 10, after her stepfather started to beat her, she said. She has lived mostly on the streets, going to shelters now and then and spending nights with clients, some of whom she calls friends.

On November 2, Vanessa broke into the maintenance room at the shelter, took a ladder and

climbed the 2.5-metre (8-foot) wall surrounding the building, said Leonora Albuquerque, one of the shelter's coordinators. She convinced two other girls, aged 12 and 13, to go back with her to the area near the stadium. It was the fourth time she had escaped in less than six months.

"It's very hard to convince these girls to lead normal lives," Albuquerque said. "Most of them think abuse and selling their bodies is just a fact of life."

(Editing by Timothy Large and Cynthia Osterman)