

'Everybody preferred children'



Child prostitution is rife in Brazil's cities, much of it catering to foreign tourists. The football World Cup next year could lead to an explosion. OLIVIA CRELLIN reports from the frontline.

On a muggy Friday evening in the northern Brazilian city of Recife, Jonathan Costa is looking out for young girls selling their bodies on the street. Driving through downtown Recife in a white Volkswagen people carrier, he points out the flags of different countries that line the beachfront.

'The sex agents use these flags during the day to meet up with potential customers,' he says. 'It's one of the many codes the industry has here. If you're from Germany, for example, you wait under the German flag and someone will come hook you up.'

Costa is the Assistant Director of Shores of Grace, a Christian charity that works to take children involved in prostitution off the streets.

In 2010 UNICEF estimated that 250,000 child prostitutes were working in the sex industry in Brazil, but local NGOs say it could be as many as a million. A key tourist destination thanks to its breathtaking beaches, Recife is rapidly becoming known as one of the worst cities in the world for child trafficking and sex tourism.

With the World Cup scheduled to take place in Recife and other Brazilian cities in June 2014, there is an urgency to the work of both government bodies and charities working to combat child prostitution. Aware of the threats posed to children during such mega-events, the government began a new initiative, Extra Attention, in 2011. Making its debut during the 2011 St John's Eve festival, 40,000

Prostitution is legal for those over 18, but the industry is poorly regulated and minors are often overlooked. This girl, working in Recife, says she is 19.

educational kits were distributed, containing information and guidance on how to report child exploitation. The project also set up Child-Friendly Spaces during the festivities. Still, NGO workers like Jonathan Costa know it will be difficult to prevent an 'inevitable' increase in child prostitution during the World Cup. 'I believe that with the World Cup coming up next year we're going to have a major explosion in the sex business,' he said. 'We've already seen more girls on the streets since the Confederation Cup began [in June this year].'

Making ends meet

One girl Costa made sure wasn't among them was Amanda. Sitting on a huge sofa in the NGO's new rescue home, she is watching cartoons on television. Since leaving home to live on the streets, Amanda has had two abortions while working in prostitution. She turns 14 in a few days' time.

'My life was complicated. I was on the streets and taking drugs,' she said. 'I lived with my grandmother because my mum couldn't provide for me. She made me go out and sell gum on the streets.' Amanda was five at the time. She said she would often lie down with men – as old as 50 at times – just to feel safe at night. They would pay her about \$3 or give her drugs or food in exchange for sex. 'I was in so much danger, exposed to so much, all because of money,' she added.

Poverty is the main issue that drives girls like Amanda into prostitution, but the contributing factors of drug addiction, familial abuse, police corruption and even climate change all play their part. 'There is a drought in the countryside and an exodus of people coming to the city and selling their bodies,' Costa said. 'We have a 42-per-cent unemployment rate.'

Rafaela Souza's mother looks after Rafaela's son so she can work on the streets – a common compromise for many of Recife's young mothers. 'I started when I was 13,' Rafaela said. 'I would do anything to leave this life but it's really hard because it's just me. My mum is retired but her pension is not enough.' She added that she regularly sees girls as young as 12 working in downtown Recife as prostitutes.

Beyond the law

In São Paulo, Brazil's largest city, 27-year-old Thiago has worked as a pimp and trafficker. For two years he would fly to Recife to convince families to sell their children for around \$5,000 each. 'I sought the girls in Recife because there is so much poverty there,' he said. 'It makes it easier to convince the girls to come down and prostitute themselves.' When the girls reached his brothel in São Paulo he would charge customers around \$70 per girl per hour. After Thiago collected what

the girls 'owed' him for their clothes, drinks and drugs they would realistically get 'about a quarter of what the client paid'. At the time he saw nothing immoral about his business. 'Sex was sex,' he said. 'For me, it was normal. The girls were looking for something; so were my customers.' Thiago also admitted to sleeping with girls as young as 12 when he was running the brothel.

Normalization of the sexual exploitation of children by adults runs deep within some parts of Brazilian society. 'Many underage girls here, not full-time prostitutes, line up on the streets on a Friday to sell sex,' Costa said. 'They do it just to be able to buy a new party outfit or a pair of shoes for the weekend.'

Prostitution over the age of 18 has been a legal profession since 2002, but the industry is still not regulated and is prone to corruption. This makes it difficult at times to find and root out exploited minors, who can get lost amid the legions of legal sex workers. In Rio de Janeiro, Jean Wyllys, a federal deputy, is pushing to legalize brothels and pimps, currently still outlawed in Brazil, in the hope that better policing of the industry can reduce the number of children being dragged into prostitution. In 2012 a Brazilian judge acquitted a man who had had sex with three 12-year-olds because those girls were found to be working as prostitutes.

While the Brazilian Tourism Ministry carried out awareness campaigns this year to coincide with carnival and the Confederation Cup, Wyllys blames the way the country is advertised to tourists. 'Brazilian women are sensualized, which can give the impression abroad that all Brazilian women are prostitutes, which is a mistake.' What is most worrying, however, is that of the tourists who do come to Brazil for prostitution the majority are interested in children. Thiago says nearly 80 per cent of the clients he used to welcome to his brothel were foreign – and 100 per cent of them asked for child prostitutes. 'Everybody preferred children to adults!' Thiago laughed. 'Their bodies haven't been used yet; they're fresh and clean.' ■

Olivia Crellin is a British freelance journalist currently based in New York.

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A young sex worker with a client. The vast majority of the girls' customers are foreign.