

# Researcher calls for new approach to combating transnational sexual exploitation of children

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Sexual exploitation of children abroad: the Dutch government calls on its citizens to not look away from "suspicious situations" while turning a

blind eye to the root causes of the problem.

Koning, who recently obtained her Ph.D. on transnational sexual [exploitation](#) of [children](#) from Leiden University, argues for a new approach.

## **A delicate topic**

It is something most people tend to shy away from: doing in-depth research on a delicate topic, which evokes fierce reactions, and with very little available data. Koning decided to step up to the plate. Five years later, there are four datasets for fellow scientists to build on. Not only that, Koning also set herself the goal of changing the political discourse on transnational exploitation of children. She wants to get rid of stereotypes and other assumptions, because they only get in the way of effective policies.

## **A one-sided view**

For one of her sub-studies, Koning scoured through hundreds of policy papers and Dutch Parliament documentation from the period between 1995 and 2020. She found that when it comes to transnational sexual exploitation of children, where the perpetrator comes from a different country than the victim, Dutch politicians focus almost exclusively on catching and punishing perpetrators who abuse children. They regard it strictly as a criminal law problem.

Koning has some difficulty with this narrow view. "By looking at it from this narrow perspective, politicians are in fact saying: By simply catching the perpetrators, the problem will solve itself. But: it doesn't work that way." Koning explains the one-sided view as follows: "By portraying the problem as that of evil individuals, the governments of the countries

from which these perpetrators travel can steer clear from the root causes of this type of child abuse and rid themselves of their responsibility."

## **Looking at it from a different perspective**

Koning advocates looking at the issue from a [different perspective](#). "What solutions are available if we look at it as a [public health](#) issue, or global inequality?" The advantage of those points of view is that it focuses attention on preventing this type of sexual exploitation of children. When the focus is solely on catching and punishing the perpetrators, the harm has already been done.

## **Help for people with pedophilic tendencies**

If the government was to regard the problem as one of public health, a preventive approach would have to be included—a precarious position, Koning notes. "Politicians won't win voters by sticking their necks out for helping people with pedophilic tendencies. In today's polarized society, it's more popular to take a tough stance and focus on catching and punishing the perpetrators." And yet, according to Koning, it is precisely at government level that a focus on "primary prevention of potential perpetrators" is required. Or rather there should be, if the government wants to prevent the sexual exploitation of children. "So, what can they do to stop potential perpetrators before they abuse children? What treatment and counseling are available for people with pedophilic tendencies?"

## **Sexual exploitation of children in poor countries**

In another sub-study, King identified 65 countries where transnational sexual child exploitation occurs. "To be blunt, these are all [poor countries](#)." A poignant detail, "it tends to happen specifically in places

where children's rights are somewhat in order."

"So, these are not the countries where children are forced to work as child soldiers, but places with a slightly better quality of education. The children may even speak a few words of English and they don't look starved, which would deter sex offenders."

Koning places part of the responsibility for creating and maintaining that poverty with the countries from which perpetrators travel, so-called "sending countries." After all, those countries have historically left their mark on poor countries. "They've played a role in creating the conditions in which children are vulnerable," Koning says, referring not only to the economic exploitation. "Other research shows that from a cultural perspective they also left behind certain norms, as a result of which children are still vulnerable to sexual exploitation today."

She gives Jamaica as an example, which was colony of the U.K., a well-known sending country, for a very long time. "The strict anti-homosexuality laws that are still in place in Jamaica today date back to British-empirical times. Because of the historical legacy, certain young people are still being stigmatized, discriminated against, isolated, or thrown out of their family. They have no other way to survive but to go out and sell themselves for sex."

In the approach advocated by Koning, governments around the world would have to work together to improve the situation of children in poor countries—potential victims—to prevent sexual exploitation and abuse.

## **Are public campaigns effective?**

Within the current approach, where the focus is on catching and punishing perpetrators, it is also fitting for governments to encourage citizens to help report "suspicious situations" while traveling. A well-

known example is the "Don't Look Away" campaign. The question is, however, if these campaigns are effective or not. Koning's research findings show that people's willingness to report possible abuse depends on the extent to which they feel connected to the cultures or countries where the abuse takes place. In short, the government cannot simply assume that citizens will actually report possible exploitation of children. "While I did expect this result from an academic perspective, I still found it shocking because it shows how far stereotypes can carry through—even in the case of a serious crime like the sexual exploitation of children."

## Future policy

It was important for Koning to conduct research that has an impact on society. "That's why I invited [police officers](#), policymakers, and people from NGOs to my defense and commissioned a Ph.D. journal in which I share my findings in an accessible manner. I hope my research and recommendations will help improve future policy on transnational sexual exploitation."

Provided by Leiden University

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