“I don’t want anyone to follow my path:” Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in the Dominican Republic

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Abstract

The commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) involves children in any sexual exchange with an adult for compensation—monetary or non-monetary. This article explores the experiences of sexually exploited children in the Dominican Republic. This research seeks to understand the impact global economies have on local realities and how these complex systems impact the everyday realities of young, impoverished children in the Dominican Republic. This article's findings are based on 19 interviews with children who were sexually exploited for compensation and seven interviews with parents of children who had been sexually exploited. The findings indicate that children firmly believed that they decided to engage in sexually exploitative encounters; however, all participants expressed to some degree that they did not have a choice. Further, nearly all the participants advised other children from getting involved in sexual exchanges for compensation, given the emotional toll it would have.

Keywords: Dominican Republic, trafficking of persons, commercial sexual exploitation of children, sex tourism, children

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Introduction

It is difficult to determine the exact number of children who are sexually exploited worldwide, primarily due to the clandestine nature of the sex trade and victim fear of stigmatization (UNICEF, 2017). According to estimates by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, girls accounted for 23 per cent of trafficking victims globally, the majority of which were for sexually exploitative purposes, and an estimated 73 million boys under 18 have experienced sexual violence (UNICEF, 2014; 2020). Carpinteri et al. (2018) also argue that existing data vastly underestimates the number of children1 who are being sexually exploited worldwide. Accurate estimates are difficult to achieve due to problems of defining, underreporting, limited support

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1 According to the UN Convention on the Rights of Children, "children" is defined as any human under eighteen (Article 1).
services, and the continued criminalization of juveniles involved in sexually exploitative exchanges (Kenny et al., 2019). While some literature exists related to the sexual exploitation of children in regions such as Latin America and the Caribbean, there is a lack of empirical research exploring the dynamics and local realities of children in the Dominican Republic. Given this limitation and need, this article focuses on children's commercial sexual exploitation (CSEC hereafter). The study uses the voices and insights of children who have been exploited for compensation and parents of children exploited in the Dominican Republic.

"Trafficking in persons" as outlined by the United Nations Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking of Persons, Especially Women and Children outlines three elements to trafficking: an “action,” a “means”, and “a purpose” (UNODC, 2020). The “action” outlines the act, whether that be recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring, or receipt of a person (Article 3). The concept of “means” refers to how the action is achieved; in the protocol, this is described explicitly as coercion, abduction, fraud, deception and, more ambiguously, the “abuse of power or a position of vulnerability” (Article 3). Lastly, the purpose of the actions and means is simply that of exploitation, whether it be forced labour, sexual exploitation, slavery, or organ removal (UNODC, 2020). All three elements must be present to constitute trafficking, except in the case of children, the “means” element need not be present if a child is involved (UNODC, 2020).

The international definition of trafficking of children recognizes the inherent power dynamics present between adults and children, so consent cannot ever be legally given by children given their inherent vulnerability (Franchino-Olsen, 2019; Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017). Given this understanding, a third-party exploiter does not need to be present for a child to be a victim of sexual exploitation (Franchino-Olsen, 2019). Any sexual act with a child is a violation of children’s rights and dignity for the benefit and sexual gratification of the adult exploiter (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017; Parada et al., 2017). Therefore, this article defines sexual exploitation as any sexual exchange between an adult and child, even if the participants identified the encounter as "voluntary".

Commercial sexual exploitation of children encapsulates all types of sexually exploitative acts involving children in illegal economies, including sex trafficking, pornography, stripping, sex tourism or any other activities of a sexual nature (Carranza & Parada, 2010; Franchino-Olsen, 2019). The commercial component distinguishes CSEC from other forms of sexual abuse as it occurs when sexual abuse is compensated with cash or payment of some measure, either directly to the child or some third party (Carpinteri et al., 2018; Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017). Exploitation can also be an ongoing process wherein adult exploiters maintain ongoing contact with children for exploitative purposes, often presented as pseudo-relationships (Mayorga & Velasquez, 2004). CSEC might also involve non-monetary transactions; sexual acts can be exchanged for what is termed survival sex. Children exchange sexual acts for necessities such as food or shelter (Miller-Perrin & Wurtele, 2017).

The Current Literature on Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children
Experiences of sexual exploitation and violence severely hinder various aspects of development in children, including physical, psychological, and social development (UNICEF, 2017; World Health Organization & Pan American Health Organization, 2012). Research in the United States has found that children's psychological consequences can include self-esteem issues, affective disorders, suicidal ideation, and emotional and cognitive setbacks (Kenny et al., 2019). International organizations have similar findings for children, specifically in the Americas; the trauma of sexual exploitation has been found to strongly correlate with negative mental health consequences, including depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, panic disorder, and anxiety (Kenny et al., 2019; UNICEF 2014; WHO & PAHO, 2012). There are numerous other consequences to sexual exploitation. Physical injuries can result from violent sexual encounters, increased risk of exposure to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections, as well as a heightened risk of early pregnancy (UNICEF, 2014). Underaged victims of commercial sexual exploitation had an increased likelihood of absence or withdrawal from school, involvement in criminal behaviour, and increased chances of running away from home (Selvius et al., 2018). Sexually exploited children have also been found to have an increased likelihood of engaging in other behavioural problems such as inappropriate sexualized behaviour and consumption of drugs and alcohol (Selvius et al., 2018).

Existing literature explores how the sexual exploitation of vulnerable populations like children comes from structural factors. Goldenberg et al. (2015) found that gender inequality and economic insecurity in Tijuana, Mexico were key factors shaping young women and adolescent girls’ vulnerabilities and involuntary involvement in compensation for sexual acts. In their discourse analysis, Zhang et al. (2012) found that most research exploring sex trafficking in Latin America concluded that poverty was one of the top factors impacting involvement in trafficking. While their analysis was not specific to child sexual exploitation, close to two-thirds of the literature analyzed focused on the exploitation of children (Zhang et al., 2012). Other studies, such as a US national study (Estes and Weiner, 2001 cited in Kenny et al., 2019), found that sexually exploited children usually came from families either on the edge of poverty or considered to be impoverished. Mayorga and Velasquez (2004) found that many children in Cartagena, Colombia live in dire situations of poverty, leaving them vulnerable to financial manipulation in exchange for sexual acts.

Context of the Dominican Republic

Currently, the Dominican Republic is considered a medium-income country by the UN economic index and has experienced economic growth upward in recent years (Paredes, 2019). However, high portions of the population live in impoverished states; 31% live below the national poverty line and lack access to employment, education, and adequate food and shelter (Andrinopoulos et al., 2019). Dominicans with low income experience high rates of human rights abuses, poverty, and social inequalities (Morgan, 2019; Parada et al., 2016; 2017). Poverty, as outlined previously, is often cited as the primary reason children and young adults entered the sex trade (Mayorga & Velasquez, 2004; Zhang et al., 2012; Goldenberg et al., 2015).
The sociohistorical development of the Caribbean in general and the Dominican Republic specifically has facilitated the large scale move towards tourism, catering to the sun-seeking tourist (Padilla, 2007). The extreme economic inequalities between the Global North and Global South have created an affordable vacation spot for middle-class individuals travelling from more affluent nations, usually located in the Global North (Kempadoo, 2004; Padilla, 2007; Padilla et al., 2018). As a result of this, the Dominican Republic receives approximately 4.5 million tourists annually (Padilla et al., 2018), though the official Ministry of Tourism of the Dominican Republic estimates over 6 million visitors every year (Ministry of Tourism, 2020).

The Dominican Republic’s affordability facilitates its establishment as a top sexual tourist destination (Brennan, 2005; Padilla, 2007). Bollock (2010) goes so far as to describe the Dominican Republic as the sex capital of the Caribbean. Sex seeking tourism in the Dominican Republic has been highly researched, and the literature on sex work (Kempadoo, 2004; Bollock, 2010), sex workers (Carrasco et al., 2017; Cernigliaro et al., 2016; Padilla et al., 2008; Tan et al., 2017), and sex tourism in the Dominican Republic is vast (Brennan, 2005; Cabezas, 2004; Padilla, 2007; Padilla et al., 2018). Despite its establishment as a sexual tourist destination, the Dominican Republic remains a context wherein sex work is illegal (Cabezas & Campos, 2016). Thus far, few studies have focused on the exploitation of children in the Dominican Republic, and the role of an active sexual tourist destination has facilitated the large-scale exploitation of children.

Popular tourist destinations considered hubs for sexual tourism more commonly have higher rates of commercial sexual exploitation of children (Ribando Seelke, 2019). High rates of CSEC are indeed the case for the Dominican Republic. UNICEF (2017) reported that sexual exploitation of children under 18 is one of the highest forms of violence against children in the Dominican Republic. Experts estimate that CSEC is frequently underreported (Shelley, 2010), suggesting that incidents of sexual violence against children in the Dominican Republic might be even higher. UNICEF (2017) reports that during the day, children are frequently found on beaches and other touristic areas engaging in sexually exploitative encounters for compensation; during the nights, children under 18 can be found working in brothels in larger cities.

Methodology

This article is a subset of a larger, year-long research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and approved by [University] Research Ethics Board (xxxx-xxx-x). The larger project explored factors related to child abuse and commercial sexual exploitation in the Dominican Republic. First, the research team interviewed 479 participants: sexually exploited children, parents of sexually exploited children, frontline workers working with sexually exploited children, business owners with suspected links to the trade, children uninvolved in the sex trade, and community members. However, this article focuses on 19 interviews with sexually exploited children and seven interviews with parents of sexually exploited children. The authors selected children and parents as the subgroup due to the direct impacts that commercial sexual exploitation has on children and their families.
The children interviewed, aged between 14 and 18, had been previously engaged in sexually exploitative encounters and were retired or enrolled in programs that aided in retiring during the interviews. Interviews were conducted in 12 major regions of the Dominican Republic: Santo Domingo, Boca Chica, Santiago, Samaná, La Romana, Puerto Plata, San Pedro, San Cristóbal, Higüey, Mao, Dajabón, and Azua. The study areas were selected based on an identified presence of children participating in sexually exploitative encounters. In each area, institutions that undertook the aid of sexually exploited children were identified and approached to help with recruitment. The participant recruitment for this article was challenging, given the children's ages and the nature of the subject matter. Parents' recruitment also proved a difficult task, as parents who were identified usually had a child who was still being sexually exploited, and parents were therefore hesitant or unwilling to participate. To ensure all research was conducted ethically, only children who were already receiving support from the organizations identified were interviewed. The research team prioritized the comfort and safety of all children and parents. As such, the interviews with children under the age of 18 were conducted exclusively by the same female investigator due to the delicate nature of the topic and the experience and expertise she has on the subject matter, particularly in trauma and social work. The participants were informed that their participation was voluntary.

This study used a grounded theory qualitative design (Birks & Mills, 2011; Bryant, 2019; Charmaz, 2014, 2015, 2020; Clarke et al., 2018; Urquhart, 2013) to explore the CSEC in the Dominican Republic. Charmaz (2014) advocates for a constructivist grounded theory, which seeks to include the 'how' and 'what' of the phenomena so that the data shared is contextualized to the situation under study. The contextualization of the situation is particularly pertinent when examining nuanced realities such as sex work and child exploitation, which can be understood differently in the Global South versus that of the Global North. The guidelines of grounded theory direct data collection methods to flow from the research question (Bryant, 2017; Charmaz, 2014; Urquhart, 2013); in this case, the research question that guided the team was: What dynamics impact the sexual exploitation of children and their families in the Dominican Republic? The constructivist grounded theory emphasizes understanding the complexities of particular worlds and views, placing more emphasis on participants' values, beliefs, and views (Bryant, 2019; Clarke, 2019; Clarke et al. 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The interviews were conducted in Spanish and were audio-recorded after receiving participant consent. Interviews were then transcribed and coded in Spanish. Following a grounded theory approach, open coding was done wherein significant events were identified and labelled to discover common processes and events (Charmaz, 2014). NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software was utilized to complete the latter process. Once initial coding had been established, the second phase of identifying common themes took place. In total, 119 open codes were developed, 12 axial codes and four thematic codes. Significant themes and quotes were subsequently translated into English by the authors. Identifying information was removed. The study is subject to the following limitations. First, the research team only interviewed participants who were
already receiving support from organizations supporting children being sexually exploited. Children who had no access to aid were not interviewed; therefore, their plights remain unheard and unexplored.

This article does not explore the history of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. There has been a well-documented history of Dominican and Haitian tensions, and the distinct economic development of each country has led to consistent Haitian migration to the Dominican Republic (Andrinopoulos et al., 2019). A constitutional change in 2013 disabled the Haitian descendant’s ability to obtain citizenship in the Dominican Republic and has resulted in the further vulnerabilization of the Haitian population (Andrinopoulos et al., 2019). Although other studies have found that the heightened vulnerability of the Haitian population and strong anti-Haitian discourse prevalent in the Dominican Republic may facilitate the sexual exploitation of Haitian women and children (Petrozzillo & Wooding, 2013), these intricacies were not explored in this study.

Lastly, studies like that of Kempadoo (2004) and Brennan (2005) have explored the nuances of race and sexual exploitation in the Dominican Republic context. A complex nexus of webs exist involving deep institutionally embedded discrimination and racism interwoven throughout politics, economics, and social ideology, reinforcing and reproducing conceptions of racial inferiority (Morgan, 2019). While the authors note the impact of deeply embedded narratives surrounding racialized bodies and their impact on the over-sexualization of Dominican children, the participants in this study did not directly speak to these issues. Though the article discusses racialization in a general sense, the nuances of race and racialization are not explored in this article and therefore remain a limitation in this study.

**Findings**

The following section examines the factors that impacted the participants or their children into seeing the exchange of sexual acts as a viable and tolerable situation. Children and parents described the emotional toll the involvement in exchanging sexual acts for compensation had on them and those close to them. The following are the major themes identified by the children and parents of children being sexually exploited.

**Reasons for Participating in Sexually Exploitative Encounters**

Difficult economic situations influenced exploited children. Both parents and children identified that their tight economic situations facilitated their participation in sexually exploitative encounters. Some of the children described the desire to help supplement their family’s income as a driving factor. “...Before I started working [in CSEC] my brother, my mom, they needed rooming, and he and I weren't working. Because I love her so much, I decided to help her in that way, but she doesn’t know” (Laura, Boca Chica).

For others, the decision came after they had fallen on more challenging economic times. Elizabeth, aged 17, shared that after becoming pregnant, she decided to leave her abusive boyfriend
for her child's safety. Suddenly on her own, she needed a way to provide for herself and her baby and exchanging sex for money had opportunely presented itself to her.

*I started because there was a man who'd say to me, "let's go do it," I told him, "no, I'm not used to sleeping with guys off the streets." He said, "I'll give you this much." I told him, "no, I’m not used to it," until one day I went with him because I really needed to (Elizabeth, Boca Chica).

Some children shared that the process of sexually exploitative encounters never felt right to them, but because of their financial needs, they had to continue. Mercedes shared that after leaving an abusive partner and no family to turn to, she was forced to begin working on the streets to support herself. "I couldn’t find a way to support myself and a way to pay [for] the lodgings. After I ran out of money, I had to start in prostitution, obligatorily" (Mercedes, Santo Domingo).

At times, children were enticed by the economic freedom of their friends. For most participants, the reality of sexual exchanges for compensation was rendered a possibility because their friends were already involved.

*My friend, she would say to me - she never, at the beginning, she never said, "do this." Never, but after she would start saying, "my clothes, I got it this way. My food, I got it this way." Basically, she was trying to tell me that, and, after that, I started with her (Sonia, Boca Chica).

Friends that introduced young girls into sexually exploitative encounters had different levels of involvement. The involvement ranged from simply discussing sexually exploitative encounters with their friends as a potential avenue to economic gain all the way to actively recruiting younger girls.

*A friend. My mom was hitting me, and my friend told me, "come on, let's see if you find a gringo or something." After, we went to Boca Chica and I got a gringo (Margarita, Boca Chica).

In a few cases, older girls would operate as a third party in the sexual transaction, connecting older men with younger girls. “So, there are people that are seekers and say 'hold on, let me call someone, I’m going to find you a gringo. You just give me something, and I'll find one.' They basically sell you" (Yesenia, Santiago).

Some of the retired exploited children did not reflect fondly upon the girls who had introduced them to sexually exploitative encounters.

*A friend of yours will always be with you, in the good and in the bad. She isn’t going to introduce you to vices; she won't tell you "do this" ...She's going to say- let's say if I'm going to do something bad, "don't do that, that's not okay." That’s what a friend is, but in these times, there aren’t any such things as friends (Vanessa, Santiago).
Parents shared similar sentiments regarding the beginning process. Parents believed their children had started to engage in sexually exploitative encounters to buy items that they as parents could not provide for them.

*The problem is the fantasies that these girls have. If they see a dress - a pair of pants cost a thousand pesos and they can’t buy it, or their parents can’t buy it, they say "I can get it with this man," or if not, they give them the one thousand pesos. I think they don’t go with them for love; they do it for the money (Dolores, Mother in Boca Chica).*

Parents often felt that their children were particularly swayed by the economic freedom their friends appeared to have. It was difficult for them to present their children with a convincing argument to not participate in sexually exploitative encounters. “She found a couple of friends, friends with nice things. I just couldn’t. I was working in washing and ironing and doing some cleaning here and there, and I couldn't give her what she needed” (Fatima, Mother in Santo Domingo).

**Interactions with Exploiters**

The children who participated shared instances in which they were taken advantage of. In some cases, parents and children identified that the child's friends had used some deceit level to get them involved in sexually exploitative encounters. Other young women involved in sex work or who had been involved in sex work had deliberately forced some children to participate in sexual acts. A group of older girls invited Vanessa out, but the night quickly turned when the bar owner tried to force her into working.

*They took me to one [a bar], but they told me that we were going to the bar to work, but not to work selling your body, to work serving, like in a café. When we got there, there was a lot of bedrooms, and I said that I didn’t like it, and they said, "now that you’re here, you’re not leaving”* (Vanessa, Santiago).

For children that had worked in bars, bar owners were frequently cited as taking advantage of younger children. Similarly, Ana Maria and her friends received gifts from one bar owner, who later forced them to remain in the bar attending patrons sexually until they paid him back.

*He was the owner of the bar because he told us, “until you pay all of that, you’re not leaving.” We told him, “but we didn’t ask you to buy us anything,” and he said, “you’re going to have to stay here, bound”* (Ana Maria, Santiago).

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2 1,000 Dominican pesos is equivalent to approximately 17 USD (conversion estimate was calculated via OANDA).
Children noted that being underage was often part of the appeal to exploiters. One child explained that she often called men's attention because she looked young. "On the street, they call you 'come here, little girl, I know what's up' and from there, we talk" (Rosario, Santo Domingo).

Participants frequently discussed the men who solicited exploitative sex acts from children. There was no standard way for how the solicitation process worked. Contact between older men and children were reported to happen in a variety of different ways. These could include a third party being asked to arrange something, a third party reaching out to the young girl once they had a client, established relationships, meeting in bars or meetings on the street.

“We’ll meet each other on the street corner, but I don’t leave with them just like that, in front of the entire world. I stay there, and we talk, and we get each other's contact [information] so that no one sees that I left with that man. After that, I give it some time, and then I leave, after, because people whisper (Rosario, Santo Domingo).

In a few instances, children developed what they considered to be long-term relationships with older men who exploited them.

"I started with him when I was 11 years old...I was in a bar. So, they wouldn’t let me in; I was outside. My friends went inside and bought [things], and I was outside. Then, he came out of a Jeep; he came walking and, without wanting to, I pushed him, but it was because I was going to turn around. He asked me what was wrong with me. I told him, "nothing." From there, he liked me and things like that, so it happened (Vanessa, Santiago).

Children rarely discussed a fixed financial exchange with the men that exploited them. Some children shared that monetary compensation was subject to the discretion of the man or woman exploiting them. “Sometimes, there’s some who pay two thousand, a thousand five hundred, a thousand and that’s how people pay, the majority of them” (Elizabeth, Boca Chica).

Several children had violent encounters with men, and nearly all of them had described dangerous situations that had happened to someone they knew. “[I know] women that are cut, men that cut up their faces. Men, sometimes, have hit them a lot (Gladys, Boca Chica). Violence and precarious situations were considered a constant reality for most young children in these situations. “Sometimes, if they feel like it, they pay you, and if they don’t feel like it, they don’t pay you. Sometimes they leave without paying. There are men, too, that hit you” (Ramona, Santo Domingo).

All parents blamed, to some degree, the men who solicited exploitative sex acts from their children. “The only thing they do is cause harm to a little girl. They feel good, but they’re causing harm. That’s what they want, to cause harm” (Dolores, Mother in Santiago).

However, even parents considered their daughters to be in relationships in some circumstances, despite not morally agreeing with the arrangements.
She had him, [he] was her boyfriend. He wanted to be her husband, but I never agreed with the marriage. After that, she left him, and she had a boyfriend that would give her everything. That man would come and visit her at home. With that man, she didn’t have to ask for anything; he’d give her everything (Teresa, Mother from Santiago).

**Emotional Toll**

Exchanging sex led to an emotional toll on both the children and their parents. A couple of children shared that these exchanges impacted all their relationship with men. “With another today and tomorrow with one and tomorrow with the other and so on. That disillusioned women. There’s some that it does and others that it doesn’t. I get disenchanted being with different men (Elizabeth, Boca Chica).”

Some children expressed regrets in terms of how their lives might have been different had they never started. One participant began weeping after sharing that the work had changed her, fundamentally, as a person in that, despite her being only 16 years old, she no longer felt like the child she was. “No, I was a girl, but not anymore...A girl stays with her mother” (Sonia, Boca Chica).

Several children noted the toll that their work might have on their parents. While others were aware of how their parents worried, some did not share their work with their parents. As such, they lived in fear that their parents would find out one day.

*I would ask God to not leave me on the streets because my dad was going to die, suffering over me. They would tell my dad a lot of stuff, "How is it that your daughter is out on the street at those hours?" He would cry because I, sometimes, would go up to three days without going home, and my dad would be crying, and my mom would go crazy, looking for me. They thought something had happened to me* (Ana Maria, Santiago).

For parents, the emotional toll was highly impacted by the concern over their child’s safety. Parents would express feelings of desperation over their inability to make their children stop. “They [my daughters] would tell her that I was going to die, seeing all the suffering she was going through. She’s a little calmer now. I have never stopped feeding her. I feed her (Fatima, Mother in Santo Domingo).”

At times, parents expressed frustration with the lack of intervention on the part of authorities.

*Those people that do that should be brought to justice because what they do shouldn’t be done. They don’t even think that if they have daughters, they don’t think about her either because they look for another and those who do that and*
keep doing that because there are no laws. The laws aren’t followed (Consuelo, Mother in Boca Chica).

**Cautioning Other Children**

Although not all children expressed regret at having entered the sexually exploitative encounters industry, most of them did share that they would not recommend other children to engage in similar actions. A participant was asked to share advice for other girls that were considering beginning exchanging sexual acts for compensations; she simply said: “I don’t want anyone to follow my path (Margarita, Boca Chica).” Participants' advice often came from things that they had ignored or left behind, such as their studies or listening to their parents. Their realities informed their advice to others.

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\text{Sometimes, you say that it’s good, but that, if it hadn’t been for that, I would be in school, in university. But because of peer pressure, I left school. Sometimes I didn’t go; I'd miss a few days. I would have already finished my schooling, and I’d be in university studying something (Gladys, Boca Chica).} \\
\text{Above all, the children emphasized that 'life on the streets' was not worth their hardships. Children emphasized that they had learned that the streets brought nothing but hardships and cautioned others against it.} \\
\text{I’d tell them not to go out on the streets, because on the streets all you find is illness or that something will happen to you because on the street there isn’t anything else. On the street, the only thing that exists is problems (Yanira, Santiago).} \\
\text{Many developed a strong sense of maturity and self-awareness at a young age, evident in their advice.} \\
\text{I would tell her [another young girl] to not do what they're doing because I’m living that too. I’m sixteen, and I've lived through what these streets are. I know how it is. I would tell them not to bother with that because friends, it’s true, no one hurts another, but when you see - when you make the mistakes - and then I see my sister and I tell her, “you know that this isn’t easy” (Wendy, Boca Chica).} \\
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**Discussion**

According to the **UN Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking of Persons, Especially Women and Children**, all forms of exploitation of children are considered trafficking (Article 3). Further, children are understood as being unable to consent to sexual encounters given their position of vulnerability (Franchino-Olsen, 2019). Although according to the interviews, children that engaged in sexually exploitative encounters with adults for compensation chose to do so, the article recognizes them as victims of predatory advances and understands all the children
interviewed as victims of exploitation. The research explored the dynamics that impacted the sexual exploitation of children in the Dominican Republic. The author’s ‘theory’ is that the global context has created a local reality in which adults seeking to exploit children are not seen as perpetrators of violence. The understanding of adults as non-abusers has enabled for the conceptualization of CSEC as a financial transaction, one where children see themselves as agents.

As the findings indicate, most participants believed that they had “chosen” to engage in sexually exploitative encounters. Children’s involvement in commercial sexual exploitation in the Caribbean plays into the macro-level reality of disadvantaged groups operating within a system that limits their ability to survive through legitimate streams. As such, the commercial sexual industry becomes an area wherein children attempt to escape other unforgiving realities, namely those of difficult socioeconomic, sociopolitical, and family level circumstances that negatively impact their quality of life (Mayorga & Velasquez, 2004).

A significant portion of the population is impoverished in the Dominican Republic; according to Andrinopoulos et al. (2019), 31% of the population lives under the national poverty line. In the interviews, lower-income was connected to the desire and willingness to engage in sexual exchanges. Although most participants expressed that the decision to participate had been their own, the decision usually came from a place of financial need. The findings indicated that impoverished children are presented with vulnerable situations in which they are positioned with decisions based on day-to-day survival rather than legitimate choice. Parents stipulated that they attempted to provide their children with necessities, though participants rarely had enough disposable income to access other needs, such as clothing, shoes, desired food, or entertainment. In situations where nearly half the population lives in impoverishment, struggle to meet their daily needs, lack access to services and education, underaged sexually exploitative encounters is only one of numerous elements that significantly hinder children's rights (Mayorga & Velasquez, 2004). The reality of a difficult choice was evident in the participant responses; most believed they did what they had to do to survive.

Shelley (2010) argues that families' financial hardships are more likely to impact women and girls. The view of women as property and as a means of generating funds, partnered with the social belief that the value of women’s education is less vital than that of a man’s, result in women and girls being used to increasing a family's economic standing (Shelley, 2010). Financial hardships result in girls being pulled out of school, given less to eat, and forced to help support the family. The latter was reflected in this study; 17 of the 19 interviews conducted with children were young girls. Female participants often shared that they had left school before engaging in sexually exploitative encounters or during their time on the streets. The retreat from formal education was often lamented by girls who participated in the study, as they felt that they had limited the potential of their futures by dropping out. When socioeconomic and cultural circumstances trap women financially and limit their access to work and education, children’s involvement in sexual exchanges for money are further perpetuated (Mayorga & Velasquez, 2004). The children often described situations where financial need pushed them towards exploitation. In one instance, a girl
had escaped an abusive relationship with her baby and began to engage in sexually exploitative acts with men to pay her rent. The girls were also intrigued by other girls' financial freedoms who had already been introduced to exploitation.

The lack of access to the formal labour market given their age made it so that children sought alternative means of income. Though impoverishment and gender inequality impacted the girls to seek alternative forms to earn money, the cultural context also played a role in influencing the young girls to see their sexual exploitation for compensation as an option. Various researchers exploring the sex trade industry in the Caribbean have used the political economy of sexuality to unify the macrostructural analysis of globalization theory with the subjective experiences and local meanings in the Caribbean (Padilla, 2007; Kempadoo, 2004). The impact of socioeconomic status on creating circumstances of disadvantage and vulnerabilization is not new; however, the Dominican Republic's specific context creates a complex understanding of exploitation and agency regarding children. The dichotomy of structural vulnerability and “decision-making” strongly contributes to children’s involvement in the commercial sexual exploitation industry in the Dominican Republic. As Kempadoo (2004) argues, agency, sexual exploitation, and its contradictions are embedded in the Caribbean sex industry. Sexual capital then becomes utile on a national level; the Dominican State has benefited from the population operating as a form of resource so that sexually exploitative encounters has become more than an individual choice and instead become a part of a national development strategy (Bhattacharyya, 2005; Cabezas, 2008; Kempadoo, 2004).

While some authors have argued against the infantilization of women and sex work in the Caribbean (Cabezas & Campos, 2016), the contradictions are further complicated when discussing the sexual participation of children. Though the political economy of sexuality begins to explore the globalized market of sex and desire in the Caribbean, few have looked at how it is further complicated when discussing children being sexually exploited. The interviews indicated that children in the Dominican Republic are not outside the sexualization and commodification process. Most of the children interviewed did not view their exploiters as perpetrators of abuse and instead viewed the exploiters’ interests in underaged bodies as an expectation. Despite children being an inherently vulnerable population and the global power dynamics present between local and tourists, the notion that adult perpetrators take advantage of underaged locals was not strange to the children interviewed. Instead, the reality of this power imbalance created a situation where exploitation was normalized. Rather than recognize abuses of power, both children and parents had conceptualized the situation so that children were not being taken advantage of; instead, children were simply part of a market where they had a service that was being desired. Although most children described danger and abuse with exploiters, the children expressed this type of dynamic as inevitable.

When attention was drawn to their age, the children did not believe that this was a significant factor. A few of the children cited their youth as the very reason men and women were interested in engaging sexually with them. Although parents sometimes alluded to their children
being taken advantage of, this was done mainly in the context of gender; only one parent considered girls being taken advantage of because of how young they were. Children's inability to view these men and women as perpetrators of exploitation indicated that their realities are embedded with the knowledge that adults wanting to engage in exploitative sexual practices with underaged bodies were not inconceivable but somewhat expected. The systemic sexualization of underage girls and boys is unrecognizable to those being exploited; these power dynamics obscurity points to the more significant global issues that Dominican children are unequipped to recognize their human rights, thus see their exploitation as "normal".

The issue of exploitation is further complicated when considering the recruitment of children by children; several participants reported that they had been introduced to exploiters or exploitative situations through other children. The dynamic of children recruiting children creates a complex dynamic in which children become both “exploiter” and “victim” (Campos & Cabezas, 2016). Although some children described other adult exploiters, for example, bar owners, most of the interviewed reveal other children who made the initial introductions. The role of children in the recruitment process further complicated the situation as the exploitation is removed directly from the exploiters (that is, the grown men and women paying to exploit a child sexually), and the onus of responsibility is placed on the children for choosing to engage their friends. In one interview, a participant expressed her anger with her friend for having made the introduction; meanwhile, she did not express any anger towards the men who had exploited her. All the children had known someone around their age already engaged in sexual encounters, demonstrating the decreased stigmatization of these activities as a prospect for children their age.

The existing dynamics embedded in Dominican children's reality creates a complex situation, one in which children are indirectly told that having sex with adults for money is not an abuse of power. Poverty plays a key role in facilitating the justification of sex work for compensation; however, the context of sex tourism and children witnessing other children engaging in sexual encounters normalizes children's participation in these activities. Even the parents expressed the understanding that children engaging in sexual encounters were more of a rebellion than exploitation. The participants revealed a stark understanding of what is constituted sex and that children have the agency and wherewithal to consent to sexual encounters with adults. None of the participants believed they were being abused; they simply considered their encounters to be sex for money. Almost none of the participants saw the paying patrons as predators. The fact that both parents and children could calmly discuss the topic of children engaging in sexual acts with adults was startling. It is notable to remember all participants were under the age of eighteen at the time of the interviews, and many discussed their first sexual encounter with an adult as young as twelve years old, describing the encounter as a decision rather than a position of vulnerability. While sexual exchanges for children's compensation were not necessarily considered acceptable, the interviews showed that neither were they considered outside the scope of reality.

It is vital to recognize the profoundly negative impact children's involvement in CSEC has on their mental and physical health. The interviews only began to reveal the impact sexual
exploitation had on the children interviewed, as children often minimized or spoke matter-of-factly of the violence and psychological impacts they experienced. A few participants shared their contraction of a sexually transmitted disease and physical violence at the hands of their exploiters. All the participants shared that they had known someone whom an exploiter had physically attacked. Apart from physical violence, children as young as fourteen often expressed general mistrust feelings in people surrounding them or with society at large. The children described having developed a level of dissociation from their work and expressed regret, not in participating in sexually exploitative encounters, but on the toll it took on their lives. One child who had successfully retired when interviewed shared that she constantly tried to forget what she had experienced, indicating the ongoing effects of the trauma of exploitation. All of the children cautioned other children to avoid exchanging sexual practices for money, indicating their knowledge of the implications these exchanges had on their lives and the potential negative consequences exploitation would have on others.

**Conclusion**

This article has explored the additional complications and nuances present when discussing children sexual exploitation. It is essential to recognize and protect against children's exploitation and note the implications global power dynamics have in driving young girls and boys to engage in sexually exploitative exchanges for compensation. Further attention must be paid to the role globalization and tourism has in facilitating the exploitation of children. The eradication of commercial sexual exploitation does not diminish the dangerous living situations of Dominican children. Instead, the socioeconomic, political, and historical context has persuaded and facilitated children's entrance into sexually exploitative situations and must be scrutinized when examining CSEC. Future scholarship might examine how local organizations can begin to address the broader social issue while still providing support to young children being sexually exploited. While current organizations are aiding children in leaving a sexually exploitative situation, more attention must be paid to preventative measures.

Nearly all the participants warned future children from participating in sexually exploitative encounters, which demonstrates the lack of real choice in the decision-making process. While most recognized their need to do so, they actively warned others against making the same choices. Participants spoke of their engagement with regret, lamenting the negative mental health impacts; however, the children expressed that the "choice" needed to be made. Children rarely saw themselves as victims; while this does not reduce the need to protect these children, it presents the need to explore further the complex concepts of agency children involved in sexually exploitative encounters have of their role in the exchanges. Future studies should explore the impacts that involvement in sexual exploitation has on children at such a young age. Further, studies should focus on the way framing children as agents is used by children and their parents to make sense of their realities.
Throughout this article, we have identified participation in sexually exploitative situations as a survival tactic for children; it is essential to note that we do not consider children engaging in sexually exploitative encounters on par with adults choosing to engage in sex work. Instead, the emphasis on children identifying their exploitation as a choice highlights their current realities' tenuous nature. A child “choosing” to engage in sexually exploitative encounters as a solution indicates the desperateness of their current realities. Sexual exploitation in the Dominican context must be analyzed. When the focus is solely on children’s commercial sexual exploitation, their lives' complexities and the broader social context are quickly forgotten. Removing a child from exploitation in the Dominican Republic does not aid them if they are not presented with alternate their current realities' desperateness realities, namely impoverishment, class divides, racism, mistreatment, and physical and emotional abuse. The continued impoverishment of a significant portion of the population enables the large-scale exploitation of underprivileged communities. Merely seeking to eradicate commercial sexual exploitation as a practice does not address the insidious societal factors which lead children to view sex work as a viable option.

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Declaration of Interest

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