

# Iraq Boys Trapped In Commercial Sex Trade

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IRAQ: Focus On Boys Trapped In Commercial Sex Trade

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BAGHDAD, 8 August (IRIN) – Hassan Feiraz, a 16-year-old boy, has started a desperate new life since being forced into the sex trade in Baghdad, joining a growing number of adolescents soliciting in Iraq under the threat of street gangs or the force of poverty.

"Every day I cry at night," Feiraz said. "I'm a homosexual and was forced to work as a prostitute because one of the people I had sex with took pictures of me in bed and said that, if I didn't work for him, he was going to send the pictures to my family."

"My life is a disaster today. I could be killed by my family to restore their honour," he said, explaining that homosexuality was totally unacceptable in Iraq due to religious beliefs.

Following the conflict in 2003, there has been an increase in the number of commercial sex workers (CSWs) in the country, especially among teenagers, according to local officials.

This increase is attributed to economic pressure faced by families countrywide and the presence of new prostitution rings that have sprung up since the invasion. With society in turmoil and a raft of other serious issues to address, child protection has not been uppermost in the priorities of the transitional government.

The gangs use money or threats to get teenage boys to work for them, officials said.

"Many of us are working under threat, but others are there because they don't know how to survive and found it as an easy way of getting money," Feiraz said. "Someone should help free us from these

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criminals."

### AN INCREASING PROBLEM

Saeed Muhammad, a senior official in the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, said it was addressing the problem but was under-resourced.

"We have been informed about dozens of cases of male prostitution, and all of them [the boys involved] were threatened," he said. "But we don't have the capacity to deal with them."

Muhammad said a special commission had been set up, with help from the Ministry of Interior, to tackle the rings forcing young men into the sex trade.

According to Muhammad, unofficial information suggests there could be as many as 4,000 male commercial sex workers. There are no statistics on the number of boys caught up in the business countrywide, but officials fear that it could be in the hundreds.

Boys are said to receive the equivalent of around US \$10 for each person they have sex with, with the gangs reportedly taking five times that amount.

The leader of a ring of commercial sex workers told IRIN that the livelihood they were offering Iraqi boys was "a job like any other". He insisted that the boys were not threatened and that anyone who came to work for them could leave at any time.

"Iraqis love boys and our work is to offer pleasure to them," the ring leader, who calls himself Abu Weled (or "father of the boys"), said. "They are all gay and, in Iraq, the homosexual is something cheap and bad, but we make them feel special when working with us."

Abu Weled's gang also has some girls under 16 years of age soliciting for him, he said.

### HOMOSEXUALS UNDER THE LAW

Under Shari'ah or Islamic law, homosexual practise is a religious crime that carries the death sentence.

The transition constitution in place in Iraq for the past two years does not address homosexuality. A new constitution is currently being drafted.

Whether or not homosexuality is illegal, it is a taboo subject in Iraq and homosexual acts are strongly condemned by Muslims. Yet, these prostitution rings suggest, there is a demand for commercial sex workers to engage in homosexual acts.

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Sheikh Hussein Salah, one of the heads of the Shi'ite Muslim community in Iraq, told IRIN in Baghdad that the families of those boys engaged in homosexual practices should "kill them", whether the situation was forced on them or they entered into it freely.

During Saddam Hussein's regime, Salah said, homosexuality was illegal and homosexual practices were punishable by death. "We hope that this will be applied under the new constitution," he added.

Some Baghdadi families said they have stopped their children from going to school or university for fear that they would be lured into the unacceptable trade.

"If I found that my son was doing something like that, I would kill him straight away, because it is an offence to our God and a crime against our honour," Kudaifa Abdul Lateff, father of three teenagers said. "Homosexuals are nothing more than animals."

### ECONOMIC PUSH TO PROSTITUTION

Rising unemployment, compounded by conflict, has led to the desperate search for money to survive, despite the physical, psychological and health dangers involved in commercial sex work, local officials say.

According to a survey by the Iraqi Ministry of Planning and Development Cooperation released in April, 48 percent of youths in the country are unemployed, most of them discouraged by poor salaries in those jobs that are available.

"We are a poor family and my husband cannot work because he has serious epilepsy," Um Zacarias, a mother of two child sex workers, said. "Three months ago, Abu Weled came to our house offering us money if we let our two teenage [aged 13 and 14] boys work with them.

"Thanks to him, today we have a good income. People may find it surprising, but at least we can eat now and I'm proud of them."

### GOVERNMENT RESPONSE

The Ministry of Interior, after an appeal by the Ministry of Labour, has started a new commission to search for the ring leaders and tackle families sending their children into the sex trade.

A senior interior ministry official, who preferred to remain anonymous for his own security, said that leaders of two gangs in Baghdad had been captured so far.

More than 15 boys were also being questioned, he said. Their families had not been given the real reason for their detention, in case they responded with threats or violence to the boys.

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"When you hear what the teenagers have been through, you really fear for your own children," the ministry official said. "They could fall victim any minute to these heartless gangs."

The Ministry of Labour has also developed a programme, focusing on non-judgemental psychological counselling, to rehabilitate boys who want to return to a normal life without suffering social discrimination.

### RESCUE EFFORTS

Based on information supplied by the Ministry of Labour, two small local NGOs are trying to help the child sex workers. One of them, Iraqi Peace and Better Future (IPBF), has collected the names of more than 50 teenage boys who say they cannot leave the trade because of threats. Few cases have been resolved, however.

"We have been trying to do our best in taking those unlucky boys and girls from the streets of the capital," said Abdallah Jassim, spokesman for IPBF. "But sometimes we are stopped by the gangs, who threaten us. And the government cannot offer us special security on a daily basis."

The Iraqi Red Crescent Society (IRCS) is also waiting for approval and funding for a proposed rehabilitation project for teenagers, it said. So far it has had few donors.

Meanwhile, with few positive prospects in sight, many boys in Baghdad are living in fear, urging that someone, somewhere come up with a solution to their plight.

"I hope that one day I will live without the fear that I may find my father with a gun or a knife ready to kill me because he has discovered what I do for a living," said Youssef Hatab, a 15 year-old boy.

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