

Gov't struggles with jump in teen prostitution

Thousands of kids, as young as 12, victims of commercial sexual exploitation

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More children than ever before are falling victim to prostitution and sexual

exploitation and the government is struggling to tackle the problem or prevent it, *The Jerusalem Post* was told on Thursday. "They are a hidden popu-

lation and it is very difficult to find them, but based on our activities we suspect there are a few thousand children, some as young as 12, who are victims of commercial sexual exploitation or prostitution in Israel," said Reli Katsav, manager of youth at risk and girls programs at Elem: Youth at Risk.

Katsav spoke about this growing phenomenon on Wednesday at a joint session of the Knesset Committee on the Rights of the Child and the Subcommittee on Trafficking in Women looking into the government's failure to appoint a body to effectively deal with the problem.

The two committees, headed by MKs Zevulun Orlev (Habayit Hayehudi) and Orit Zuretz (Kadima), respectively, heard that almost no formal data or research exists on the sexual exploitation of minors and very little educational or preventative mechanisms are in place to reverse this trend.

"I see it as a triangle: One point is the child involved in prostitution, another is the pimp or person pushing them to do it and the third point is the client," Katsav told the *Post*. "In the middle there is all of us as a society, and if we do not deal with it, if we ignore it, then it will continue to happen."

There needs to be improved sex education among youth, as well as better prevention and prosecutions by law enforcement bodies, she said.

"If the prostitute is a minor, then the client is clearly breaking the law," Katsav said. "If that client is thrown into jail then other people will hesitate."

Teenage prostitution is not usually based on the exchange of money but rather on receiving commercial goods or favors in exchange for sex or sexual acts, she said.

"It happens less on the street and more in schools or via the Internet," Katsav said. "If a young, vulnerable person is propositioned on the Internet then it can lead her into prostituting herself."

While young girls, especially those from abusive backgrounds, were extremely vulnerable, Katsav said young boys were in just as much danger.

"It's hard to detect this type of prostitution when they are younger because at first they do not realize they are being taken advantage of or that sex is not something that can be bought. They believe that it is acceptable," she said. "Only when they are a bit older do they realize that they are involved in something they cannot escape."

Around 60 youths in Tel Aviv are receiving treatment for being involved in prostitution activities, and in Haifa the figure is roughly 25, according to Elem, which operates mobile assistance units in Tel Aviv and Haifa.

In addition, more than 100 youngsters have called the organization's hotline in recent months reporting they had been victims of commercial sexual exploitation but have yet to come forward in person.

Another concerning trend was the falling age of children involved in prostitution. While the average age hovered around 14, children join the sex trade as young as 11. Also, the average age of the "clients" was dropping, she said.

At the Knesset on Wednesday, the panel was told that even though an interministerial committee had been created in 1997 to address the problems, its key recommendation - to maintain some type of formal cooperation between the various authorities - was never readdressed.

In addition, a report prepared by the Knesset's Research and Information Center found that there is not a single rehabilitation facility in Israel designed to help minors who have been involved in the sex trade. It also said that law enforcement was at fault, too, with only 35 cases of commercial sexual exploitation of a minor being opened in the last decade and of those, 19 were closed due to insufficient evidence.

"This is an extremely

serious situation and there seems to be no dedicated framework for treating minors who have been used for prostitution," Zuretz said following the hearing. "The existing frameworks for treating adult women are not suitable for minors, who end up falling through the cracks when ministries run away from taking care of the problem."

The MK also emphasized that there was no framework to address the vulnerability of children without legal standing in Israel who fell victim to the sex trade.

However, Tzippi Nachshon-Glick, director of the Department for Young Adults and Girls in the Ministry of Welfare and Social Services, told the *Post* on Thursday the ministry runs several programs to identify and treat youngsters involved in prostitution.

"We contribute more than NIS 600,000 to Elem's mobile units and we are in the process of establishing two more units in Eilat and Beersheba," Nachshon-Glick said.

The ministry was also about to start a research project "to understand how it happens and who is most at risk from becoming a victim," she said.

"This is a very sensitive issue and it is hard to locate the people," said Nachshon-Glick, adding that the ministry was also set to establish a network of hostels to help "young women who find themselves in trouble and have nowhere else to go."

While most of the focus has been on detecting young Israelis who fall victim to sexual exploitation and prostitution, Katsav said another alarming concern involves children of migrant workers, asylum-seekers and refugees, who are particularly vulnerable.

"Our mobile unit goes around the Tel Aviv central bus station and is starting to find them," she said. "They come here as refugees and they are a weak population in our society and can quickly find themselves involved in prostitution."