

Medicine beyond frontiers

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Sexual Abuse and Sexual Exploitation of Children and Youth in the Greater Mekong Subregion

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Sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children and youth are issues of growing concern in the Greater Mekong Subregion, which includes Cambodia, Yunnan Province (China), Lao People's Democratic Republic, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam. The research conducted in these countries revealed various factors contributing to the problems. Children with developmental disability and those with low levels of education were more at risk of sexual abuse. Factors at family level that contributed to sexual abuse of children were child neglect, poverty, psychiatric illness of a family member, substance abuse by adults in the family, family breakdown and dysfunction. Unsafe school environment and poverty were found to increase children's vulnerability to sexual abuse at the community and societal levels. Factors that made children vulnerable to sexual exploitation were ignorance, low educational level, previous history of sexual abuse, premarital sex and lack of social skills on the part of the children. Factors at the family level were ignorance, low educational level, poverty, family breakdown and dysfunction and materialism. At the community and societal levels, such factors as the presence of traffickers and sex establishments, the demand for virgins owing to fear of HIV/AIDS infection among clients, poor working conditions in the factories, lack of awareness and enforcement of laws related to child labour and prostitution, and underdevelopment in rural areas and rapid urban growth, made children extremely vulnerable to sexual exploitation. The sexually abused and sexually exploited children often need long term rehabilitation. However, there are a small number of preventive and rehabilitative programmes available to children in all countries. There are no programmes that specifically address specialized problems related to sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children in Yunnan Province (China), the Lao People's Democratic Republic and Myanmar. There are few specific programmes in Cambodia, Thailand and Viet Nam, and they are concentrated in urban areas.