Zero Tolerance is a small national charity working to end men’s violence against women (VAW) in all its forms. We promote a primary prevention approach, believing that changing societal attitudes, values and structures is the key to ending gender-based violence. We also believe that pervasive gender inequality in our society creates a culture in which violence against women and children is common and tolerated and that this must change.

Our interest in this inquiry

We are very supportive of this inquiry as we have serious concerns about the prevalence of child sexual exploitation (CSE) in Scotland. We believe that this is a huge and under-recognised societal and public health problem.

We are aware that in its first tranche of evidence-gathering, the Committee wishes to hear from support organisations for vulnerable or excluded young people, female and male. We don’t provide such support directly to young people, but we provide training and guidance for those who do. We also work directly with young people who have an interest in preventing sexual exploitation and have informed our work on this topic, including our group of young people challenging porn culture, the ‘Porcupine’ project.

Our concerns

Definition of CSE

We query the usefulness of the current Scottish definition of CSE. It’s heavily focused on exploitation for some kind of remuneration, either cash or in kind. We know that in fact much sexual exploitation involves no exchange of goods, gifts or cash, but is in fact conducted for reasons of conformity and due to the power imbalances cited in the definition. For many girls in particular, taking part in sexually exploitative practices, such as sharing images of their body parts via mobile phones, is not done for remuneration but to be accepted and recognised in a culture that routinely objectifies women’s bodies.

Ringrose et al, in their 2012 study of sexting, also talked about “a deeply rooted notion that girls and young women’s bodies are somehow the property of boys and young men” that creates a culture in which this particular form of sexual exploitation thrives. This goes beyond remuneration.

A crisis moment or a culture in crisis?

We think that some of the language in the call for evidence suggests that the committee’s thinking about CSE concerns a crisis model, in which CSE is defined by a single dramatic moment or incident which can be suddenly
stopped (e.g. the question about prevention refers to helping children ‘escape’). We see CSE somewhat differently; we see it as everyday, normalised behaviour for very many children and young people.

It may be useful for the committee to consider a parallel with thinking in Scotland about domestic abuse. This used to be seen as concerning specific explosive incidents of physical violence, but now we understand that it is generally about a pattern of coercive control being exercised over a long period of time by one person over another to deprive them of autonomy.

CSE may be similarly about a long-term process with many seemingly low-level incidents, from sexual harassment at school or on-street to being pressured to take part in sexting or sexual activities, progressing over time to more obviously harmful activities such as being coerced into prostitution. There may be many points before a crisis when such behaviour could be challenged but may not be noticed or perceived as involuntary.

As Ringrose et al say in their study for the NSPCC, “Few teenagers wish to be excluded from the sexual banter, gossip, discussion or, indeed, from the flirtatious and dating activity endemic to youth culture. But to take part is to be under pressure – to look right, perform, compete, judge and be judged. Much of young people’s talk, therefore, reflects an experience that is pressurised yet voluntary – they choose to participate but they cannot choose to say ‘no’.”

**CSE’s prevalence and impact on all children and young people**

We also have some concerns that the focus on gathering evidence from organisations working with young people who are vulnerable or excluded may mean that the prevalence of this issue is lost, so we wish to reemphasise that this is an issue that affects all young people.

E.g. in one study on ‘sexting’, which is just one form of sexual exploitation, the NSPCC reported that “research on sexting has found rates as wide as 15% to 40% among young people, depending on age and the way what is understood as sexting is measured” noting however, that “Many teenagers do not even use the term ‘sexting’ indicating a gap between adult discourse and young people’s experience”. iii

Another study on the same topic addressed “The prevalence and “mundanity” of sexting – this is something that is widely known among this age group [Year 9] and while not all are engaging in such practices, they have peers that are”. iv

The Ringrose study also notes that the effects of sexting, which is just one form of exploitation, “are not limited to the actors engaged in some specific practice but permeates and influences the entire teen network in multiple ways.”

As many as one in two girls may have experienced some form of sexual abuse by the time they are 18, and for boys up to 16 the figure is one in six. vi
The number of sexual offences involving children and young people is rising. The number of sexual assaults against young people recorded by the police in 2011-12 increased by 246% compared to 2010-11 in cases where the victim was under 13 and increased by 266% compared to 2010-11 in cases where the victim was aged 13-15.\textsuperscript{vii}

In 2011, we provided our ‘Under Pressure: Preventing Teen Abuse and Exploitation’ training on 6 occasions in locations across Scotland and found that:

1. 58.5% of youth workers had experience of young people exchanging images or texts with content which could be seen as sexually demeaning or abusive.
2. 36.9% of youth workers had experience of young people saying they felt pressured into engaging in sexual activities that they felt uncomfortable with.
3. Only 7.7% of youth workers had not been aware of young people involved in harmful or exploitative situations or behaviours.\textsuperscript{viii}

The pre-course questionnaire identified concerns from trainees about issues such as, “Young people engaging in sexual activities for points”; “Young people receiving texts from boys saying they would be ‘great strippers’”; “Young people being forced into prostitution due to abusive relationships by being introduced to class-A drugs and becoming addicted”; and “An assumption about prolific teen sex as an acceptable norm.”

We did further training sessions in 2013 and found that in one area, 73% of trainees had experience of young people exchanging sexualised text messages; and 46% of trainees had experience of young people having been pressurised into activities of a sexual nature that they feel uncomfortable with. In another area the figures were 44% and 31% respectively for the same issues.

The youth workers we have engaged with are clear that this is a serious concern and that it needs more training, resources and leadership.

Preventing CSE

In terms of what might prevent CSE we recommend a number of changes.

1. Changes to the broader culture of Scottish society. We think this is absolutely vital. In a society which says that lap-dancing and strip clubs are an acceptable form of ‘entertainment’, and which tolerates prostitution, to a greater or lesser extent in different regions (most of all in Edinburgh which licenses ‘saunas’ which everyone knows are brothels) it is hard to imagine many initiatives aimed at ending CSE being effective. Why care about a 17 year old girl being exploited in prostitution if on the day of her 18th birthday she can do it as a ‘job’ and have sections of society deem that as a form of ‘work’? A society awash with sex ‘entertainment’ venues is one that creates clear pathways from child exploitation into adult exploitation. Likewise, we create pathways for perpetrators – men who wish to abuse and exploit women and
children can be introduced to sexual exploitation by e.g. an 18th birthday night out, a ‘stag’ night or a corporate/team night out in a lap-dancing club.

2. **Improved sex education in Scotland.** We need a move from focusing on physiology to healthy relationships, consent and pleasure, so that young people (over the age of consent) are empowered to participate in sexual activities that are healthy and pleasurable and to reject non-consensual activities, including boys not seeking non-consensual sex. This could link with other forms of relationship education – there are various programmes available, including our own ‘Respect’ package which includes content on sexual exploitation (new version being launched in 2013).

3. **A fundamental rethink of our approach to child protection in Scotland.** Our model of child protection is built around waiting for a child to disclose abuse or exploitation, even though we know that disclosure is difficult and unlikely. Professionals are too often waiting for a crisis to intervene or for a disclosure, which means chances to intervene early and prevent an escalation of exploitation are missed. Scotland’s Child Protection Guidance is being refreshed now but we would advise that this process is delayed to allow for this inquiry’s findings to be taken into account.

4. **Social work to give more priority to this issue.** There are currently very few over 12s on child protection registers, we need to examine why that is; and social work needs to upgrade its lowered priority for child sexual abuse.

5. **Content on CSE included in pre-qualification training for teachers, social workers, police officers, youth workers, nurses, etc.** Professionals’ understanding of these issues is vital, as shown in the grooming case in Rochdale where many officials perceived children’s involvement in prostitution as a ‘lifestyle choice’. (See below on victim-blaming).

6. **More work to challenge the availability of pornography.** The pressure to consume it and to get involved in making and distributing it to peers is huge and this feeds a culture which normalises sexual exploitation.

7. **A focus on perpetrators.** The call for evidence talks about preventing children becoming involved but not about preventing people becoming exploiters. While it is important to meet the needs and hear the experiences of victims of exploitation, it’s also vital to examine the motives, behaviours and attitudes of those who perpetrate CSE. There’s a blurred line between victim and offender in this issue – children can be groomed to become perpetrators of abuse within their own peer group while also being exploited themselves.

A theory that the misogynistic culture that we live in grooms young people to become perpetrators has been expounded by academics such as Gail Dines and Rebecca Whisnant, whose presentation “It’s Easy Out Here for a Pimp: How a Porn Culture Grooms Kids for Sexual Exploitation” argues that “kids and young people are being groomed to accept and act out the sexuality of prostitution—to see sex as something to be bought, sold, and bartered, and to see this commodification as normal and even beneficial”. They also argue that
“At the broader cultural level...boys are primarily groomed to become—in the words of sexuality educator Cordelia Anderson—"users, takers, and pornography makers" and that girls are taught “that their value lies primarily in their bodies and in their ability to attract male attention.”

There need to be more perpetrator focused strategies and a discussion about what cultural factors create a propensity to exploit others.

8. An end to victim-blaming. There is a strong culture of victim blaming in CSE. In Rochdale, young people were seen as architects of their own problems and prostitution as a ‘lifestyle choice’ for children. Teenage women involved in sexual exploitation can be seen as ‘streetwise’ or condemned as ‘slutty’, ‘promiscuous’, ‘sexually precocious’ etc. and not have their vulnerability to exploitation questioned.

After child prostitution was exposed in Rochdale, the Co-ordinator of a local NHS crisis intervention team told the Home Affairs Select Committee: “It was about attitudes towards teenagers. It was absolute disrespect that vulnerable young people did not have a voice. They were overlooked. They were discriminated against. They were treated appallingly by protective services.” The review concluded that social workers repeatedly ignored victims of child sexual exploitation in Rochdale because they perceived teenage girls to be “making their own choices”.

9. Gendering of sexual exploitation work: key to making progress on this issue will be making sense of the connection between gender and inequality and exploitation. Most forms of CSE are not gender neutral – they are about boys and men exploiting girls and women. That’s not to say there aren’t boys who are also victims or women who are also abusers but the vast majority of cases of CSE involve boys and men exploiting girls, which mirrors the exploitation that happens between adults. Prostitution among adults is an expression of gender inequality and a form of violence against women. The Scottish Government has described it as such in the ‘Safer Lives: Changed Lives’ document. Any work to end CSE will need to take this gendered perspective into account in order to be effective.

The Ringrose NSPCC study said: “Sexting is not a gender-neutral practice; it is shaped by the gender dynamics of the peer group in which, primarily, boys harass girls, and it is exacerbated by the gendered norms of popular culture, family and school”. A culture in which girls are persistently stereotyped as submissive, domesticated, appearance-driven and boys are persistently stereotyped as aggressive, violent, active, and dominant lays the foundations for sexual exploitation and abuse, and all work to tackle CSE must address these root causes.

10. A strategic approach: Scotland needs a national strategy for tackling CSE, linked to a strategy on preventing all forms of violence against women and children (at present no such strategy exists but the ‘Safer Lives: Changed Lives’ shared approach document on VAW is being refreshed to be more outcome-focused).
Further information:

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i  A qualitative study of children, young people and sexting, Jessica Ringrose et al, NSPCC 2012
ii A qualitative study of children, young people and sexting, Jessica Ringrose et al, NSPCC 2012
iii Sexting: An Exploration of Practices, Attitudes and Influences, Prof. Andy Phippen, 2012, NSPCC
iv An exploratory study of the prevalence of sexual abuse in a sample of 16-21 year olds, 1991, Child Abuse Studies Unit, University of North London
v Sexual abuse in a national survey of adult men and women: Prevalence, characteristics and risk factors, 1990, Child Abuse & Neglect, D Finkelhor et al
vi Scottish Government crime statistics 2011-12
ix “It’s Easy Out Here for a Pimp: How a Porn Culture Grooms Kids for Sexual Exploitation” – slideshow and script by Dr. Rebecca Whisnant, University of Dayton.
xi http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhaff/uc182-v/uc182-v.pdf
x http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2009/06/02153519/0