

## **“Boys in the sex industry”**

**Presentation by  
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In 2004, I was involved in a research regarding Romanian male adolescents in Rome. Moreover, since 2001, I have done outreach work in Rome, in areas known for male prostitution. In the last six months only we got in touch with more than 100 male adolescents.

Both activities allowed us to better understand the phenomenon of young male sex workers on the streets. First of all we discovered that boys involved in the sex industry are both Italians and foreigners. Our focus however is on the foreign adolescents as they are the most vulnerable.

We also found that children on the streets organise themselves in street families to provide each other with emotional links and give care and support to its members. Like in any other family we have to take into account that each member of this street family plays a different role. Social workers must consider that a particular child will not trust them if they don't get in touch with and are trusted by the whole family first.

Thirdly, we found that most foreign male adolescents fall into prostitution as a result of a vicious circle with the final objective to get easy money in order to buy items that they consider status symbols of a denied integration (such as Nike, mobiles).

How does this vicious circle work?

The first element that we have to take into consideration is that through the migrant across borders foreign adolescents loose the social control of their family or local community and elaborate a new system of values. When they arrive in Italy they try to satisfy their urgent needs (house, work, relationships with their peers), but they do not succeed - with the consequence that their self-esteem and trust in what they can achieve on their own decreases more and more. At this point, their body becomes the only means through which they try to integrate, and prostitution becomes their style of life through which they can show their potential. In this sense, sex work for some of them can be an activity that allows them to dominate their Italian partners and exercise power on the society and at the same time to maintain a masculine role without doubt about their gender identity. The statement that we hear more often is “I play only the active role”. In their eyes, this is important also with regard to their health because they believe that in this way (by playing the active part) they cannot be infected with sexually transmitted diseases. Often, in a next step, some of the adolescents become the ones who make money from the sexual exploitation of others.

Our work takes into account all these factors - we try first of all to negotiate with the adolescents their awareness about health risks. Then we try to help them to obtain legal

residency so that they can satisfy their primary needs in other ways than prostitution. Only after those steps we offer them an individual project of integration that they are free to accept or not.

To conclude, we are speaking about the migratory project of adolescents – it seemed really utopian at the beginning of their travel, but become real if they are put in the conditions to implement it.