



# Forced migration and child trafficking

**Researchers explore this menacing phenomenon along Nicaraguan borders**

by Jeanne Armstrong

The moment Mirna Carranza knew she made a difference in Nicaragua was when her research worked its way onto the agenda of a local police service.

The McMaster University associate professor of social work is the principal investigator in a project that examines commercial sexual exploitation of children in Nicaragua. Last spring a local police chief told Dr. Carranza that it wasn't a problem in his country.

A week later, he called her back. "He said, 'I thought about it some more and I'd like to put this on our regional agenda. We need to tackle this.'"

"It takes a stranger to come in and start talking about this," she adds.

After three years of collecting data and conducting hundreds of interviews, Dr. Carranza is beginning to feel less like a stranger in a country that has one of the highest rates of trafficking and sexual

exploitation in the Americas.

At the first World Congress on commercial sexual exploitation of children in Stockholm in 1996, the issue was defined as "sexual abuse by the adult and remuneration in cash or kind to the child. [...] The child is treated as a sexual object and as a commercial object."

Dr. Carranza and co-investigator Henry Parada, a professor at Ryerson University's school of social work, first decided they

**In Nicaragua in 2010 there were:**

- 6,000** calls to Nicaragua's hotline on child welfare;
- 19** potential cases of trafficking investigated by the government;
- 15** children identified by the police as victims of trafficking;
- 5** convictions achieved, with sentences of seven to 37 years; and
- 3** Granada police officials investigated for possible complicity in human trafficking.

*Source: U.S. State Department Trafficking in Persons Report*

wanted to observe this exploitation on the ground in 2008. With the help of funding from various grants including the Canada-Latin America and the Caribbean Research Exchange Grants program (LACREG), they chose to study Nicaragua.

Along with faculty and students from the Autonomous University of Nicaragua (UNAN) in the city of Managua, the team identified where the problem was occurring: border

towns have the highest incidents of trafficking, attracting poverty, transients and business transactions, and coastal cities held no migratory regulations for people who enter the region, says UNAN professor Luz Angelina Lopez. These factors made regions like Somotillo, Chinandega and Rivas prime areas for commercial sexual exploitation of children.

Through interviews and observations, the team began to observe some root causes.

Globalization is a major one, says UNAN professor Isolda Jimenez. When children and family consume advertising and media, they are bombarded by material things they think they "need."

It begins with a brand new cell phone, says Prof. Jimenez. If an adult friend is willing to buy one for a poor child with the goal of exploiting them, the child will take it with the hopes of obtaining more – a vehicle, a

ticket out of the country, and eventually a better life.

Another cause is rooted in gender inequality, adds Dr. Carranza.

A common assumption among Nicaraguans was that mothers force their children into sexual exploitation for money. Dr. Carranza thinks this is inaccurate.

"When men are irresponsible providers, they leave women and children

as a country that has an increasing number of victims and fails to comply with the U.S. Trafficking Victims Protection Act – but that they are now beginning to make significant efforts to comply with the act.

Dr. Carranza says her project is making a difference in attitudes towards sexual exploitation of children since she began in 2008.

"The level of awareness is definitely higher," she says.

While heightened awareness, trust-building and funding from programs such as LACREG have been essential for the continued success of the project, Dr. Carranza's work continues.

By the end of 2012, she hopes to create a research survey to measure the incidence of children and women involved

in trafficking in numbers, as well as mapping the migration of victims who are forced to other Central American countries, Mexico, the U.S. and Canada.

It is only until these goals are completed that some final recommendations will emerge – be it for increased education or for better accountability in Nicaraguan law, among other goals.

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vulnerable to poverty. When women have two jobs to support children, there's no supervision."

Child commercial sexual exploitation continues, Prof. Jimenez says, because Nicaraguan society does not recognize it as a real problem. She says this attitude extends to the justice system.

"Impunity makes it so this phenomenon continues to grow across the country."

The U.S. Department of State tracks human trafficking in countries around the world. In 2010, they identified Nicaragua