WHEN IS A WOMAN not a woman? In some traditions, a female human being is considered to be a woman when she marries, regardless of her age. In certain communities, first menstruation is taken as a sign of womanhood. In other societies, the age when childhood ends shifts with changes in fashion, pop culture, and sexual imagery.

There are other thresholds too, enshrined in national laws relating to the age of marriage, of sexual consent, and of legal responsibility. These differ among countries and within countries, so that a 17-year-old in some countries may be old enough to marry, but not old enough to buy alcohol or take out a mortgage.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) gives us a benchmark for when childhood ends: all people under the age of 18 are children. This is not to deny 17-year-old females their right to be considered ‘women’ if they wish. It does not suggest that the group often labelled ‘adolescents’ or ‘teenagers’ or ‘young people’ is immature. It is a way to remind ourselves that anyone under the age of 18, regardless of other thresholds and labels, has a right to special protection.

This is particularly important in relation to children and sexual activity. No one would argue that a 19-year-old man is breaking the law when he has sex with his 17-year-old wife (presuming laws on the age of marriage are complied with). On the other hand, this man would be in contravention of international law if he offered his 17-year-old spouse/partner to others for sexual purposes.

Regardless of the age of sexual consent/marriage, under international law (CRC, Article 34) a person under the age of 18 cannot be exploited for sexual purposes. Even where the under-18-year-old is cited as being ‘willing’, or when the person might be said to have entered into sexual commerce ‘voluntarily’, this remains true.

Yet, all over the world, under-18-year-olds are indeed exploited for sexual purposes. If someone profits from this, through money, gifts, or favours, then we say that the child is commercially sexually exploited. They are, quite literally, sold for sex.

We read regularly about children under the age of puberty who are abused by paedophiles; we hear much less often, though, about those children who are on the threshold of adulthood—between boy and man, girl and woman—whose bodies are bought by non-paedophiles for sexual pleasure.

When we do, we most commonly hear the children being called ‘child prostitutes’. This is an unfortunate term that makes it too easy to forget that, first and foremost, this person is a child. While all human beings have rights, this person has special rights.

Adolescent girls far outnumber adolescent boys as victims of commercial sexual exploitation, for a number of reasons. One is the persisting belief that men/boys ‘need’ sex while women/girls should ideally be passively compliant with this. This reinforces the idea that it is OK for a man to buy sex, and it is tacitly accepted that women should supply what the man needs.

In fact, we now know that most commercial sexual exploitation of girls occurs as an extension of the sex trade more generally. Most of the male clients are not stereotypical ‘child sex abusers’ but regular prostitute-users who buy sex from an under-18-year-old.

The commercial sexual exploitation of girls, in particular, is the result of the behaviour of ‘normal’ men—our brothers, husbands, cousins and fathers—who think that it is acceptable to buy sex from a child.

It is also a result of societies that tacitly accept the early sexualisation of children, and hope that it will happen to other kids, not our own. It involves parents who do not help their children to think through sexual responsibility, and who accept aggressive sexual behaviour by boys ‘because they’re boys’.

It is the fault of you and me if we turn a blind eye to prostitution. It is the fault of you and me if we turn a blind eye to the prostitution of under-18-year-olds because it’s too difficult to deal with, and somehow stopping paedophile sex tourists seems much easier. In short, we all have some responsibility for the commercial sexual exploitation of children and for doing something about it. It is not only the responsibility of governments, NGOs, UN agencies, social services or the police. Everyone has a role to play.

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