The disappearance of 'poverty' in Dutch House of Representatives debates on the sexual exploitation of children in travel and tourism (SECTT)

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Abstract
Policymaking is storytelling; through stories, the policymaker learns of the problem, and based on these stories, the policymaker formulates a solution. In our earlier study of discussions about sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism (SECTT) in the Dutch House of Representatives, we suggest that the central story in these discussions revolves around 'crime' and law enforcement. Despite evidence on the links between poverty and SECTT, few policy suggestions target this risk factor. In our current study, we piece together the story told about the role of poverty in SECTT in Dutch House of Representatives debates, letters and documents from 1995 to 2020 using Faircloughian CDA enhanced with an analysis of transitivity. Our findings indicate that initially, poverty was indeed discussed as a key cause of SECTT. SECTT was understood as a fundamentally commercial practice through which children and their families aim to escape that poverty. Over time, however, the agency attributed to these families diminishes and focus shifts to (the actions of) abusers and exploiters. This development appears to be connected to shifting political orientations of consecutive Dutch government coalitions.

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Introduction

This study explores how poverty is discussed in relation to the sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism (SECTT) in a Dutch parliamentary setting. Children cannot consent to sex work, according to international agreements, such as the Palermo Protocol (2000) on human trafficking and exploitation. Children engaged in sex work are generally considered victims of sexual exploitation.

Sexual exploitation of children in the context of travel and tourism (SECTT), colloquially known as 'child sex tourism', is inextricably linked to poverty and economic inequality (ECPAT Luxembourg, 2016). On a macro level, Koning and Van Wilsem (2023) demonstrate that economic development significantly predicts where in the world SECTT takes place. On a micro level, too, poverty has been identified as a significant predictor for sexual exploitation victimisation (Jaeckl and Laughon, 2021; Klatt et al., 2014). Economic factors may drive exploiters and intermediaries to become involved in orchestrating or facilitating the sexual exploitation of children, often again in a context of few alternatives (Lim, 1998). Some have described cases where parents or caregivers sold their children to traffickers or facilitated their children's sexual exploitation in other ways to supplement family incomes (Rafferty, 2013; Spurrier and Alpaslan, 2017). Simultaneously, some youths turn to the sex trade as a means to survive poverty, as well as marginalisation and discrimination. They see it as a preferable alternative to child labour or begging (e.g. Montgomery, 2007; Spurrier and Alpaslan, 2017). As such, these children might not self-identify as victims (see also Brown, 1992). However, Hawke and Raphael (2016: 116) note that SECTT client-offenders 'tend to be better off than their victims (even if only marginally) and [tend to be] more highly "valued" as countries and communities pursue tourist dollars'. Whereas some travellers may misuse this power imbalance specifically to pursue having sex with children, others are simply indifferent to the age of their sexual partners whilst abroad (see e.g. Klain, 1999). In short, globalisation has created 'a perfect storm of poverty-stricken children encountering wealthy tourists' (Spurrier and Alpaslan, 2017: 404). Poverty makes it easier for exploiters to force children into sexual exploitation, and sex work can be actively performed as part of a survival strategy in response to poverty. As such, tackling this underlying driver might seem like a logical response to the problem of SECTT.

Poverty is also one of the consequences of exploitation. The presence of (cheaper) children in the workforce might drive wages and adult employment figures even further down. This necessitates families to continue engaging in more exploitative, cheap and/or child labour (Longford, 1995). Child labour (including sexual exploitation) that forces children to work during school hours can lead to missed education. This can keep generations locked in a cycle of poverty and child labour (Longford, 1995). Additionally, victims may face social repercussions leading to poverty, including stigmatisation for sex work/sexual exploitation/sexual abuse (Buller et al., 2020). This stigma also limits access to support and health services. This is in spite of the often 'devastating health and mental health consequences' of trafficking and sexual exploitation (Gerassi et al., 2017: 995). These children are cast out from their community of origin, lack a social safety net, and at times face physical and mental health consequences. As a result, access and opportunities for alternative employment and partnership are limited even further compared to prior to initial exploitation.

In SECTT destination countries, poverty also hampers efforts to prevent victimisation and pursue punishment of exploiters, facilitators and clients. A lack of adequate funds limits (local) law enforcement, in terms of the workforce, as well as training, resources and technology (Andrews, 2004). Poverty may also drive corruption, impeding investigations and sometimes even enabling exploitation directly (Burns et al., 2021). Similarly, more fundamental preventative efforts, aimed at reducing vulnerabilities more broadly, such as education or the registration of citizens, are also hampered by lack of funds (Burns et al., 2021). Abusers' countries of origin, where they travel from, tend to have more resources available to tackle this issue. However, rather than focusing on inequalities, these countries have, in the past three decades, focused primarily on measures aimed at preventing citizens getting away unpunished with child sexual exploitation abroad. These range from enabling the extraterritorial application of their criminal law and removing the requirement of double criminality, to adopting international frameworks (such as the *Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Abuse*, 2007). These also include efforts to restrict the movement of known sex offenders (see Koning, 2023: 23–24).

This tendency to focus on law enforcement policies, rather than more fundamental preventative efforts, might be linked to discursive developments. For instance, Farrell and Fahy (2009) showed that in the 1990s, the 'human rights'-framing of human trafficking dominated US media reporting on the issue. This frame links human trafficking to other human rights issues, such as poverty. From about 2002 onwards, however, the 'crime'-framing of this issue overtook as the dominant frame, and media reporting on this issue concurrently exploded. This second frame understands trafficking primarily as a criminal problem. This development occurred in parallel with US-national, as well as international, policy developments, which also moved towards a criminal justice response, focused on individual offenders.

Several Dutch cabinets since 1995 have introduced policies and instruments aimed at tackling SECTT. Despite the key role poverty plays in driving SECTT, we found that from 1995 to 2020, reactive responses, particularly law enforcement responses, have been increasingly prioritised over poverty relief and other preventative measures (Koning et al., 2023), suggesting a crime-frame-dominant understanding of this issue. These efforts include the creation of specific police teams focusing on child sexual abuse material and SECTT, and the introduction of a Policy Plan on SECTT, with frequent updates on progress offered to Dutch parliament (Koning et al., 2023). In line with this development, the political orientation of the Dutch cabinets 1992–2020 has shifted towards the right, starting in 2002. To be able to make recommendations on how to reignite an interest in poverty relief as part of the anti-SECTT toolbox, we must examine how the understanding of poverty in relation to SECTT has developed in the Dutch political arena. As such, our study aims to answer the following question: How do Dutch MPs discuss poverty and economic inequality in relation to SECTT over the period 1995–2020?

Data collection

Initial data collection

We collected 427 unique documents from the Dutch parliamentary records databases (www.tweedekamer.nl and opmaat.sdu.nl). We used several Dutch-language variations on

'child sex touris*' (for more information, see Koning et al., 2023) as search terms. Our data collection was limited to documents detailing interactions that took place between 1995 and 2020. These documents cover a variety of topics, as mentions of the sexual exploitation of children do not necessarily mean that SECTT is discussed in any detail. For example, 'child sex tourism' is also part of the title of a specialised police team that also investigates 'child pornography' ('child sexual abuse materials' (CSAM) is the preferred term). Mentions of this CSAM-SECTT team often occur in contexts in which *only* CSAM or preparatory policies are discussed, instead of SECTT. Therefore, a subsequent check was carried out whereby 1) documents were assessed for relevance, and 2) relevant passages were marked as such in Atlas.TI 24 (see Koning et al., 2023). Two hundred forty-one (241) documents containing 788 fragments were relevant for this study.

Data selection

The dataset was further thinned for the current study to include only those fragments discussing topics relating to poverty and financial need. We used the following inclusion criteria:

- Discussion of economic inequality/poverty as a cause/risk factor for SECTT:
  - Discussion of the commercial nature of exploitation. The occurrence of terms such as 'kinderhandel' and 'mensenhandel' (lit. 'trade in children' and 'trade in people', idiom. 'child trafficking' and 'people trafficking') was not sufficient to count as 'discussing the commercial nature of exploitation'. On the other hand, 'commerciële uitbuiting' ('commercial exploitation'), was, as 'commercial' is a modification of the more commonly used unmodified 'exploitation'.
  - Discussion of:
    - poverty or poor economic circumstances.
    - poverty or (potential) victim vulnerabilities more generally as linked (as both cause and consequence) to economic inequality and exploitation, including lack of (family) income.
    - linking SECTT and/or exploitation to poverty and/or inequality (this includes discussions on the financial privilege of abusers).
    - descriptions of SECTT involving *poor* children in *poor* countries.
- Discussion of responding to economic inequality/poverty as a cause of SECTT, including discussion of proposals to give development aid.
- Discussion of economic and financial hurdles in responding to SECTT, including discussion of proposals to finance interventions abroad and descriptions of a local lack of resources hampering interventions.
- Discussion of responding to economic inequality/poverty as a consequence of SECTT, including discussion of financial support for victims/survivors.

A 10%-sample was checked by the second author to gauge the accuracy of coding. One hundred fifty-nine (159) fragments, consisting of one or multiple subsequent sentences, were found to be relevant and analysed. This is a dataset of a total of 2395 words,

Table 1. Overview of selected data.

Topic	Number of sentences
SECTT as a commercial act	38
Poverty/poor economic circumstances/vulnerabilities as a risk factor	31
Development aid/cooperation as a response, including supporting local law enforcement through development aid	81
Financially supporting victims	9
SUBTOTAL (examined in depth)	159
Financing (local) (law enforcement) initiatives/responses *without* (mention of) development aid	296
GRAND TOTAL	455

averaging just over 15 words per fragment. These sentences were then categorised by topic, see Table 1. A further 296 fragments in the original dataset pertain to the financing of (law enforcement) initiatives without development aid being mentioned as a potential source of that funding.

Methodology

Our approach is in line with earlier work on representations of people smuggling/human trafficking in various European newspapers (Gregoriou et al., 2022). It consists of Faircloughian CDA combined with models from stylistics that guide the description and interpretation of various language features, with a particular focus on transitivity (Jeffries, 2010). Following Faircloughian CDA (Fairclough, 2015, first edition 1989), we employ three levels of analysis. The first level focuses on the broader historical developments that help explain why the text is the way it is. This required an overview of subsequent Dutch governments, which has been referred to at various points in this paper. The second level explores the discursive context (where is this interaction happening and when); mentions of the discursive context, where relevant, are presented in the analysis section. The third level is the textual analysis, with our dataset as its focus. This involved coding the selected fragments in Atlas.TI 24 with codes indicating processes and roles relating to transitivity analysis. We also created additional ad-hoc codes for especially striking linguistic features, such as particular forms of modality.

For the analysis of transitivity, Jeffries' (2010) model was used, itself an adaptation of Halliday's transitivity analysis model (e.g. Halliday, 1994). In this model, Actors and Goals are identified as do-ers and done-to-ers. Actor/Goal labels vary depending on the process (verb) type, and are distinct from subjects and objects. For example, in a passive sentence, the subject is the Goal of the actions despite occurring first in the syntax. In Jeffries' (2010) model (pp. 40–50), a distinction is made between material actions ('something that is done or happens'); verbal actions (language use; with Sayers, Goals, i.e., said-to-ers, and Verbiage, the said); mental cognition processes (thinking, feeling and perceiving; with Sensers and Phenomena, the sensed), and relational processes (used to indicate circumstances, possession and descriptions; with Carriers and Attributes).

For this study, material actions and processes are particularly relevant, as these refer to actions with an immediate real-world effect. They can indicate both the Actor held responsible for the action or process, and the amount of agency exercised by that Actor. Jeffries (2010: 40–41) distinguishes between:

- MAI – material actions that are intentional,
- MAS – material actions that are unintentional (superventions),
- MAE – material processes that are events, that is, doings or happenings originating from an inanimate Actor.

To illustrate the difference, Gregoriou et al. (2022) found a tendency for the news media to describe victims in human trafficking case as 'dying' (MAS), which 1) focuses on the victims, 2) indicates they are Actors in the process, but 3) are not exercising any agency. On the other hand, there were very few MAI processes in which a party (Actor) was described as 'killing' these victims (Goal).

Related is the concept of nominalisation, which is the transformation of a verb into a noun (see Jeffries, 2010). This allows for evaluations of the described processes through modifiers. It may also be used with a primary goal of linguistic economy, as nominalisations 'package up' substantial amounts of information, such as sub-processes and involved actors. However, in doing so, it also presents information as categorical that might otherwise be up for debate. Jeffries (2010: 32–33) presents the example of 'the suffering being caused to the wealth-creating business sector'. In this example, the existence of the 'suffering' is presented as a descriptor of the situation that this business sector finds itself in. It disallows questions as to the truthfulness and accuracy of that assessment of the situation, and whether the business sector finds itself in an unusual situation in the first place. Similarly, 'wealth-creating' as a nominalised pre-modifier to 'business sector' precludes questions regarding that assessment of the business sector.

Finally, we wish to note that, as both researchers are native Dutch speakers, the analysis was carried out in Dutch. Results were only translated to English for reporting purposes with both authors agreeing on translations.

Analysis

It must, firstly, be noted that poverty and economic inequality are extremely rarely discussed in relation to SECTT in the present dataset, suggesting, as we have reported elsewhere (Koning et al., 2023), that parliamentary discussions focus on other causes and solutions. Overall, four distinct periods in which the Dutch House of Representatives discusses SECTT in relation to poverty can be identified. Between 1998 and 2004, poverty relief interventions are suggested as a necessary response to SECTT, whilst SECTT is described as a commercial act. In the period 2004–2006, SECTT continues to be linked to poverty. SECTT is then described as a response to poverty by people in poverty. Poverty relief interventions are no longer offered as a 'natural' response. Between 2007 and 2010, poverty becomes little more than a descriptor of the lives of SECTT victims, which exploiters and clients abuse. From 2011 onward, poverty mostly disappears from these debates, aside from descriptions of children and the countries they live in

as 'vulnerable' or 'poor'. Given the identification of these four periods, our analysis proceeds chronologically. We highlight shifts in the terminology around SECTT that index changes in ideological stance and understandings of the relationship between SECTT and poverty/inequality.

The first mention of poverty in relation to SECTT in our dataset occurs in a letter written and presented to the House of Representatives by the Minister for Justice in 1998. Here, the role of poverty in SECTT is taken for granted:

(1) 'Finally, fighting poverty, as the key aim of Development Cooperation, is an important instrument in abolishing the need for prostitution'.

Through the nominalised 'the need for [child] prostitution', there is no room for any discussion as to whether that need exists, who has that need, and why they have that need. Although there is little room to ask these questions, the last one is nonetheless resolved, at least partially, through the further construction of this sentence. In this sentence, this need is the Goal of the Material Action: Intentional (MAI) 'abolishing' – presumably by abolishing something, one removes a key cause. This abolition is to be carried out by an invisible Actor, using an instrument that, as the Carrier in a Relational process, is 'fighting poverty'. In short, it is stated, although in a fairly roundabout manner, that fighting SECTT requires fighting poverty.

The link between poverty and sexual exploitation is, in the same letter, also made through the phrase 'commercial sexual abuse'. 'Sexual abuse' is a nominalisation. Although various labels are used, with 'exploitation' being the most frequent, we see this nominalised description of the experiences of these victims throughout the dataset. These nominalisations disallow discussions of what happens in that process of exploitation (see Jeffries, 2010). They allow MPs to come to the topic with different understandings of causes, consequences and relevant actors, whilst believing they are all discussing the same subject.

The pre-modifier 'commercial' serves to create a particular category of sexual abuse that must be considered different, but difficult to distinguish from, non-commercial sexual abuse. Throughout the letter, references to 'sexual exploitation' are shortened to 'exploitation' (both also nominalisations), but these are, again, consistently pre-modified by 'commercial'. The consistent inclusion of this pre-modifier highlights the economic nature of this issue. It appears then that a distinction is made between sexual abuse motivated by paedophilic preferences and sexual abuse motivated by commercial gain or economic necessity. The latter could be considered a response (presumably by families and/or primary victims) to poverty. Subsequent uses of 'commercial' as a pre-modifier to 'exploitation' occur in 2002 and 2004. These occurrences are a reference to: a 1996 international conference on the topic of commercial sexual exploitation of children; a code of conduct adopted by the tourism sector as a result of that conference, and article 34 of the UN *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1989). Notably, the English version of this Convention only mentions 'exploitation' without the premodifier. 2004 is the last year in which the phrase 'commercial exploitation' is used regularly. This suggests that the commercial nature of SECTT has, by this point, become so 'common sense' that it need no longer be expressed explicitly. On the other hand, later discussions of SECTT also no

longer imply that SECTT could be seen as a poverty survival strategy, as will be shown below. In none of these subsequent uses of 'commercial exploitation' does it become clear who is understood to be benefitting from these commercial acts.

The notion that SECTT is an inherently commercial act is also carried through in later statements, such as the following, in which SECTT is described as 'the supply':

(2) 'the supply [of children for the purposes of sexual exploitation] in tourist destinations must be fought with all means suitable for the purpose, including the policy measures of the [European] Community in the domain of external affairs and development cooperation' (1999, State Secretary for Foreign Affairs).

'The supply' is, again, a nominalisation: the existence of this supply is taken for granted, and who is supplying these children, and for what reason, remains vague. In fact, even the fact that 'supply' refers to children, for the purposes of SECTT, can only be inferred by those with knowledge of other texts in this discourse; in other texts relating to SECTT, 'supply' is more explicitly indicated as referring to these children (with its counterpart, 'demand', referring to clients-as-offenders).

A note must be made here also with regard to terminology. In this period, SECTT is described as '(sexual) abuse' and '(sexual) exploitation', both of which describe the issue as a criminal offense. However, as noted in example (1), 'prostitution', sometimes modified as 'child prostitution', is also used, and this does not have the same connotation of criminality. 'Prostitution' refers to sex work, which can be seen as a legitimate form of work. SECTT, on the other hand, due to children's inability to consent to sex work (as indicated by various international and national legal instruments), can never be considered a legitimate form of work. The continued use of terms such as 'prostitution' might suggest a normalisation of SECTT as a strategy for getting out of poverty. In fact, the pre-modifying 'commercial' might perhaps even suggest a level of entrepreneurship.

In short, speakers in this first period suggest that SECTT is a response to poverty, and establish that reducing poverty also reduces SECTT. However, it remains unclear whose response to poverty SECTT actually is, or how these mechanisms are supposed to work. Through Material Actions: Intentional (MAI) processes in examples (1) and (2), however, we do get some indication of what the policy response is supposed to look like. Example (2) draws on the semantic domain of physical violence, with the State Secretary for Foreign Affairs suggesting possible instruments. That even this is still fairly vague is also apparent from a debate in 1999, in which an MP asks whether development aid is to be used either to support efforts to tackle SECTT in destination countries, or whether development aid should be withdrawn from countries where SECTT occurs. In example (2), the State Secretary further emphasises that this is a call to arms through deontic modality: 'must'. SECTT may perhaps at this point be understood as just one of a number of strategies for escaping poverty, one that might even be seen as fairly entrepreneurial. On the other hand, it is also undesirable that it might (have to) be employed as such a strategy. However, the Goal of these policy processes, of the fight, is already shifting, from 'poverty' (to indirectly fight that 'need for prostitution') to 'the supply'. This is a shift from the reason that these children are 'supplied' to that supply itself. A discursive shift to 'fighting' the 'suppliers' could be, then, a likely next step.

Taking this next step would require acknowledging human agency behind these processes, which is exactly what occurs in the second period. In the years 2004–2006, the discourse shifts to more explicitly acknowledging that SECTT is a response by some children and/or their families/guardians to their poor economic circumstances by including them as Actors in the described processes. To illustrate, in 2004, the Minister for Foreign Affairs refers to 'recent research' that has shown that economic circumstances (as well as social, cultural and administrative circumstances), in particular poverty, are 'a common reason for minors to prostitute themselves'. This is a MAI-process ('prostitute'), with children as Actors, acknowledging their agency. This sentence again describes SECTT in terms of sex work. The Minister also adds that this is the case:

(3)   'especially in large families who live in desperate circumstances, making one or multiple children available for sex work forms a way out of a hopeless situation'.

Actors here are large families, rather than the children themselves, who are the Goal of the MAI-process of 'making available'. Are these families the 'suppliers' alluded to in example (2)? This 'supply', or 'making available', is equated with 'a way out of a hopeless situation', through a Relational process. In doing so, this Minister also acknowledges, again, that the cause for this action is poverty. This acknowledgement of agency could potentially lead to policy shifts, away from poverty relief and toward victim-education policies discussing the risks and harms of sex work carried out by children, that is, child sexual exploitation. This might be in the hope that these families might perhaps 'choose' alternative strategies.

However, the Minister then returns to focus on circumstances as a causal factor, rather than the choices (if they can even be characterised as such) made by families in very tight spots. He does so by suggesting that children who might be unhoused due to (civil) war are 'often addicted, abused, orphaned or a victim of war – [and] are, due to a lack of regular means of existence, especially vulnerable and could end up in prostitution'. Here, children are no longer Actors in Intentional processes, but in Material Action: Superventions. They are now people to whom things happen – victims, but of various circumstances, including poverty. Sexual exploitation is here a situational descriptor rather than yet another act through which these children are victimised.

The Minister thus suggests that sex work is an unpleasant occupation by stating that it is a state that vulnerable children 'could end up in'. In both the Dutch original and English translation, this carries negative connotations. However, we also again see the use of terms such as 'prostitution', and in example (3) even 'sex work'. This appears to be a continuation of the attitudes of the previous period, in which SECTT seemed to be considered a valid strategy for escaping poverty, albeit an especially undesirable one. However, the usage of such potentially normalising terms is more problematic in 2004 than in 1999. After all, 2000 saw the introduction of the *Palermo Protocol* and its specifications relating to children's ability to consent to sex work.

What we therefore see in this period is an understanding that (some) children are poor, or end up in poverty due to various circumstances. This makes them more vulnerable to victimisation (by their family) through SECTT; SECTT is acknowledged as a survival strategy, a desperate response by desperate families – a choice that isn't a choice at all.

These statements by the Minister for Foreign Affairs could be read as an implicit call to tackle these 'desperate circumstances' and vulnerabilities, so children will no longer 'end up' in the situation in which their families have to 'make them available'. However, the Minister for Justice argues that:

(4) 'proposals such as improving the social, economic and legal conditions in countries where child sex tourism occurs exceed the competences of the Ministry for Justice'.

This means that on the one hand, there is the argument that SECTT is a response to poverty, and that poverty should therefore be tackled. On the other hand, tackling poverty might be outside the scope of the Dutch government. This could have led to further discussions as to the extent to which the Dutch government could, should and would tackle the 'social, economic and legal conditions' in these destination countries, so as to 'fight' SECTT.

Instead, the third period, 2007–2010, is better characterised as one in which an alternative focus that *does* fall within the competences of, specifically, the Ministry for Justice is sought and found. Throughout 2007 and the subsequent years, children slowly become relegated to the position of Goal of SECTT offenders. Focus begins to shift to visible and animate non-family Actors, away from the inanimate Actor that is poverty. Poverty has, over the preceding periods, moved from being a Goal of government intervention to a Circumstance that these children (and their families) are trying to escape. In this third period, it becomes an Instrument of abuse in processes in which exploiters and their clients are Actors, sometimes in agentless passives, other times in actives:

(5) 'poverty and misery are used to exploit children for sex tourism' (2007, MP for the Labour Party);
(6) 'people who go to poor countries and abuse the poor circumstances in which children grow up' (2010, MP for the Labour Party).

Moreso, poverty, or money, is often not even mentioned as an instrument in the arsenal of exploiters and abusers (which would leave open the possibility of fighting poverty to fight SECTT). Instead, it is simply mentioned as a circumstance in which these children happen to live, rather than one these children, their families and others respond to. Often, 'poverty' is even more backgrounded, simply a characteristic of these children and of the countries in which they live:

(7) 'What are the possibilities of tackling those who abuse people who live in deep poverty, and fighting this abuse?' (2007, MP for the Christian Democrats);
(8) 'How many paedophiles who have sexually abused children in poor countries have been prosecuted in the Netherlands?' (2008, MP for the Labour Party).

Occasionally, whilst 'poverty' itself is not mentioned, the acts performed by exploiters and abusers are described in commercial terms. This is in line with the description of

SECTT as commercial noted in the period 1998-2004. However, SECTT is now explicitly noted as a profit-generating activity for exploiters, rather than as a survival strategy:

(9) 'entire families and village communities profit from the exploitation by adult sex tourists of underage children' (2010, MP for the Christian Democrats);

(10) 'look at the sale of Roma girls by their families, who then end up in human trafficking' (2013, MP for Democrats 66 [a liberal democrat party]).

Some attempts are still made to shift focus back onto poverty as a cause:

(11) 'Behind child sex tourism lies a world of desperate poverty and moral decay' (2008, MP for the Reformed Political Party).

However, these attempts are not successful.

Further suggestions to fight SECTT through poverty relief, or even an acknowledgement that poverty and SECTT are linked, are very rare from about 2011 onward.

The sidelining and later disappearance of 'poverty' as a topic in SECTT discussions from about 2007 onwards coincides with a relative sidelining of the Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade and Development, with the Minister for Justice eventually becoming the main 'owner' of this topic (see also Koning et al., 2023). In earlier periods, intentions to use development aid to fight SECTT (including through poverty relief, see examples (1) and (2)) were described as unconditional, in strongly deontic and material terms. Now, however, these have become promises (equally deontically strong) for (much less materially impactful) verbal actions, the contents of which are conditional:

(12) 'I will contact my colleague for Development Cooperation to discuss whether, and if yes, in what way, support can be given to the Cambodian authorities' (2007, Minister for Justice).

We see the recurring suggestion to fund initiatives in destination countries, sometimes with the suggestion to use development aid for these purposes, throughout the dataset. For example, in 2007, a cross-party group of MPs called for 'the awarding of development funds for the improvement of local detection'. Table 1 shows 81 suggestions to fund local initiatives, including law enforcement, using development funds. A further 296 suggestions were made throughout the full SECTT-dataset to finance initiatives without mention of the use of development funds. In our 2023 paper (Koning et al.), we showed that the vast majority of reported policies and policy suggestions were related to arresting and prosecuting offenders. We see a similarly strong focus on law enforcement in the segments focusing on financing initiatives (see also example (14)). However, the use of development funds in particular is also linked to the financing of NGOs:

(13) 'The Netherlands also finance courses [on children's rights and on recognising and reporting SECTT] for those involved in developing countries, through local NGOs and UN organisations' (1998, Minister for Justice);

(14) 'specifically in the area of the fight against child sex tourism Dutch embassies, among others in South East Asia, finance a number of smaller activities [implied to relate to strengthening the capacities of local police, educating local workers or at-risk people, and/or supporting NGOs working locally]' (2008, Ministers for Foreign Affairs and Development Aid; possibly offered in response to a motion submitted earlier that year to use development aid to improve local detection capacities in South East Asia);

(15) '[Terre des Hommes] are financed [by the Netherlands] from the budget section "Dialogue, contradiction and the sexual and reproductive health and rights-partnerships [part of the Development Aid programme]"' (2019, Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Aid).

These mentions generally involve Dutch institutional actors, such as The Netherlands (example 13, implied in the agentless passive of example 15) and Dutch embassies (example 14), with Material Action: Intervention process-types ('finance', 'financed'). Recipients (i.e. Goals) are implied to be NGOs (examples (13), possibly (14) and (15)) or local law enforcement organisations (possibly in example (14), certainly in example (12)). Whilst occasionally deontic, these fragments generally take the form of simple, categorical statements, as the majority of these segments are reports on how money has been or is being spent. The inclusion of this information is not unexpected, as a not unsubstantial part of policy preparation is the allocation of funds, which must later be accounted for. However, these recurring mentions do also suggest a consistent understanding that a lack of funds, and/or economic inequality, is hampering efforts in destination countries to respond to SECTT. However, as it is primarily law enforcement parties and NGOs that receive these funds, the latter generally with the aim to improve local law enforcement by offering training to various front-line workers to recognise and report SECTT, the funding of these specific initiatives does seem to be more in line with an understanding of SECTT as a criminal issue, rather than as an issue fundamentally linked to poverty.

In short, acknowledgements of the role of poverty in SECTT shift in parallel with the move to increasingly neoliberal cabinets. It moves from a categorical understanding that poverty is a key factor in SECTT (example (1)), linked to a strongly deontic claim that, therefore, poverty must be fought (example (2)), to little more than a background characteristic of victims (examples (6), (7) and (8)), that can be exploited by abusers (example (5)), meaning that exploiters are to be tackled (examples (7) and (8)), rather than poverty itself.

Conclusion and discussion

The link between SECTT and poverty is undeniable. As noted in our introduction, SECTT can be traced back to a lack of attractive alternative options for victims, their families and even their primary exploiters, the misuse made of this situation by predatory parties, and the inability or unwillingness of potential guardians to invest resources in fundamental preventative measures. As such, it should be clear that poverty relief would be a much needed addition to a set of policy measures aiming to tackle SECTT. Unfortunately,

however, our earlier study into 1995–2020 Dutch House of Representatives discourses on SECTT showed that Dutch policy responses, both suggested and implemented, are decidedly singularly focused on reactive, law enforcement measures and pre-emptive treatment of those with paedosexual preferences, as opposed to more preventative initiatives aimed at reducing victim vulnerabilities (of which poverty relief efforts would be part) (Koning et al., 2023). In other words, the focus of Dutch SECTT policy is 'detect, arrest and prosecute'. To borrow a Dutch expression, this one-dimensional approach is nothing more than 'mopping whilst the tap's still running'. As such, the current study interrogated if and how shifts in the language used by MPs in the Dutch House of Representatives reflect a developing conceptualisation of SECTT that focuses on individual offenders rather than on structural inequalities as causes of the issue. The existence of such a shift away from poverty would allow the continued focus on law-and-order policies, as found by Koning et al. (2023).

Our findings show that the story of poverty in SECTT debates in the Dutch House of Representatives has changed over time. In the period 1998–2003, the argument is made that SECTT must be fought, and that to do so requires poverty relief. Some suggestion that SECTT is a (legitimate, if undesirable) response to poverty is made, this is further developed in the period 2004–2006. In this second period, these children and their families are more explicitly described as actors responding to that poverty. Concurrently, coalitions in the Dutch House of Representatives shifted from centre-left to more neoliberal political ideologies. This also explains why, despite a continued acknowledgement that SECTT is a result of poverty, over time, poverty relief responses (in foreign countries) become more and more backgrounded. This is because neoliberalism favours individual responsibility and limiting government spending. With this political orientation persisting through subsequent coalitions, there is a reduction of the involvement of the ministers of Foreign Affairs and Foreign Trade and Development in these discussions (see also Koning et al., 2023). In the period 2007–2010, the agency and actions of those understood as exploiting children are highlighted. Poverty, and the resulting vulnerability, is now understood as an instrument abused by these people. At this stage, the role of poverty is reduced to circumstantial, or even less: it eventually becomes simply a premodifier, referring to these 'poor children'. From 2011 onward, poverty almost entirely disappears off the agenda. This indicates that successive governments have now developed a story about the sexual exploitation of children that backgrounds the role economic inequality and the lack of alternative options, resulting from poverty, plays for children and their families. As a result, the 'common sense' responses to SECTT present at the end of the time period covered are less likely to include poverty relief than they might otherwise have been.

Whilst the dataset is fully representative of Dutch House of Representatives debates and communications on SECTT between 1995 and 2020, it is also relatively small. To fully relate the developments in the story of poverty and exploitation in parliamentary debates on SECTT to wider political developments would require additional analysis that includes both debates from the Senate and a broader consideration of other forms of exploitation. Future research may also contrast work on the discourses surrounding SECTT with similar analyses of how MPs discuss the exploitation of adults. For example, adult victims may be assigned more agency, given the

legal possibility (in the Netherlands, at least) for adults to consent to sex work. Comparisons to debates about labour exploitation, including (non-sexual) 'child labour', would be another avenue for further study. This is because non-sexual exploitation may be even more likely to be seen as a 'valid' path out of poverty.

In sum, poverty was, in 1998, acknowledged as an important causal factor in SECTT. Soon after, the notion of SECTT as a response to the difficult economic circumstances, became backgrounded. This allows for an avoidance of complex and politically sensitive questions concerning victims' roles and needs. Responding to poverty as a cause of SECTT was, in fact, in 2004 declared more or less impossible by the Minister for Justice: 'proposals such as improving the social, economic and legal conditions in countries where child sex tourism occurs exceed the competences of the Ministry for Justice'. The role of poverty in the story of SECTT has since become one of scene-setting. Poverty is presented as merely the context, not a cause and/or result of SECTT. However, if a desire exists to actually prevent SECTT, rather than only respond to it, it will be necessary for Dutch MPs and policymakers to return to an acknowledgement of the role that poverty plays as an important underlying cause of SECTT.

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