

Childhood Abuse among Children Involved in Prostitution in Malaysia

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Abstract: The current study is aim to investigate the link between childhood abuse and the involvement of children in prostitution. Two methods of data collection were used in this study; that is semi-structured interview and narrative interview. Altogether, 63 young women safeguarded from prostitution in two rehabilitation centres participated in this study as respondents. The findings suggest that the vast majority of prostituted young women in this sample are being emotionally and physically abused and half of them are being sexually abused during childhood before they were drawn into prostitution. Around 67% of respondents were found to have suffered from multiple abuse types. Furthermore, the majority of respondents (78.8%) did suffer from multiple negative feelings like feel hurt and angry, depressed, disowned by the family, dirty, useless and wanting revenge.

Key words: Childhood, exploitation, child prostitution, abuse, emotional, physical, sexual, Malaysia

INTRODUCTION

Children in prostitution come from everywhere, village, inner cities, suburbs and small towns and from many backgrounds (Flowers, 2001). Some may come from families with severe problems, but this is not necessarily so (Bagley, 1999). Some may be running away from home and some may come from families, who no longer want them or who felt they could no longer handle them (Bell and Todd, 1998). Others may be expelled from school, school dropouts, have been sexually or physically abused, or homeless (Appelqvist, 2001; Saikaew, 1996; Estes and Weiner, 2002; Flowers, 1998).

In terms of socio-economic class, no class of children is immune from the reach of prostitution. They come from all socio-economic classes, races and ethnic groups (Flowers, 2001). Studies show that there is not only lower class children involved in prostitution and that middle and upper class young people are increasingly entering into prostitution too (Montgomery, 2001). Furthermore, there is no single pattern that can explain, how children are drawn into prostitution. The root causes of children involved into prostitution are multiple and complex (Muntarbhorn, 1996). However, it is widely believed that many young women who are involved in prostitution have a history of childhood abuse particularly sexual abuse (Bell and Todd, 1998; McClanahan *et al.*, 1999).

In this research, a child refers to a young woman under 18 years old. The word child and young woman will be used interchangeably. Here, child prostitution also

means youth prostitution, juvenile prostitution, teen prostitution and adolescent prostitution, as long as the young woman who is involved in this activity is below 18 years old.

Childhood abuse and its link to child prostitution: Many sources report that childhood sexual abuse is linked directly to the involvement of young women in prostitution (Shaw and Butler, 1998; Widom and Kuhns, 1996; Adedoyin and Adegoke, 1995). Estes and Weiner (2002) state the relationship between child sexual abuse and child prostitution is direct, powerful and long lasting. In many studies, 65-95% of young women in prostitution are reported victims of childhood sexual abuse, particularly incest and sexual assault (Estes and Weiner, 2002; Leidholdt, 2003). Typically, sexual abuse has been endured repeatedly and most of the victims become involved in prostitution as a consequence of this (Brannigan and Van Brunschot, 1997).

In Nigeria, 50% of 150 children in prostitution experienced childhood sexual abuse (Adedoyin and Adegoke, 1995). In Thailand, 73% of prostituted young women interviewed have a history of incest and 64% have a history of physical abuse/violence during childhood (United Nations, 2000). In Costa Rica, UNICEF (2001) found that close to 79% of prostituted young women were sexually abused before their 12th birthday. Swann (1998) reports that 40% of 84 prostitution-involved young women in one city in Britain have experienced childhood sexual abuse and all of them have experienced violence.

McClanahan *et al.* (1999) identified that >1/3 of 1,142 respondents had a history of childhood sexual abuse; the mean age of first abuse was 10.6 years. Those who have childhood sexual abuse experiences have substantially higher rates of ever prostitution (44.2%) and of routine prostitution (34.6%).

Mansson and Hedin (1999) indicate that 70% of 23 former prostitutes interviewed reported they had a difficult childhood including sexual abuse, emotionally negative parents and other types of social problems. Widom (1996), who examined the case histories of 908 victims of childhood physical/sexual abuse and neglect in relation to the criminal behaviour reveals that childhood sexual abuse victims are more likely to become involved in prostitution than other child maltreatment victims. In further research, Widom and Kuhns (1996) report that there is an association between childhood sexual abuse, neglect and female prostitution, but childhood physical abuse was only peripherally associated with involvement in the sex trade.

However, several studies report that childhood physical abuse is more commonly experienced by prostituted young people than sexual or emotional abuse. Hwang and Bedford (2004) for example, report that a lack of support at home was a common theme among 90% of young women interviewed and most of them described a history of physical (73%) and/or sexual (55%) abuse at home. McIntyre (1999) found that three-quarters of 50 sexually exploited young people have experienced childhood physical abuse. Flowers (2001) also, indicates that two in every three young women were physically assaulted during childhood in their homes. Farley and Kelly (2000) also, report a high incident of childhood physical abuse in their sample as 90% respondents said they were physically abused during childhood. Silbert (1986) found that 62% of respondents experienced childhood physical abuse and two thirds of these victims stated that the beating was not related to anything that they did. A Survey in New Zealand by Saphira (2001) reveals that over 68% of prostituted young women interviewed were physically abused and 64% were sexually abused during childhood. In another study, Hunter found that childhood emotional abuse is considered more significant in relation to the involvement of young women in prostitution than childhood sexual and physical abuse (Farley and Kelly, 2000). She reports that of the 123 survivors of prostitution, 85% reported having a history of incest, 90% a history of physical abuse and 98% a history of emotional abuse during childhood.

Some scholars however argue there is no causal link between child prostitution and childhood sexual abuse, as

evidence by the fact that most young people who have experienced sexual abuse do not subsequently become involved (Sereny, 1985; Jesson, 1993; Nadon *et al.*, 1998). It is generally true that not all sexually abused victims have severe reactions that result in their involvement in prostitution and vice versa, not all victims who engage in prostitution were sexually abused during childhood (Bagley, 1999; Jesson, 1993).

However, it is important to keep in mind that the cycle of sexual victimization for many prostituted children has begun during childhood (Widom, 1996; Flowers, 1998). Besides that the involvement of childhood sexual abuse victims in prostitution cannot be seen from the narrow perspective of choice—they choose or willingly to get involved in prostitution because they were sexually abused and because they have experience of sex. This is not the question. In the case of children, the involvement in prostitution is not about the decision-making process of the victims. It is about the sexual exploitation of children. Whether, children experience childhood sexual abuse or not, they are vulnerable to prostitution and those who were sexually abused during childhood are particularly more vulnerable (Dodsworth, 2000; Ireland, 1993; Jesson, 1993; Shaw and Butler, 1998). Over 50% of children involved in prostitution are not by choice, but because they are forced into the sex trade (Kidd and Kral, 2002). For many children in prostitution, their own histories of abuse and neglect have projected them onto a pathway of vulnerability, disadvantage and risk. Therefore, the link between childhood sexual abuse and child prostitution, whether direct or indirect is clear.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Child prostitution in nature is a difficult and sensitive subject (Ireland, 1993). Still, there is an urgent need to research it (Kane, 1998). One of the reasons for this research is because, as a society, we in Malaysia have very limited knowledge of the phenomenon, as well as limited explanation of the involvement of children (Montgomery, 2001). Many aspects are still unknown and are pretty much concealed from society.

In this research, the use of the children-centred approach would seem to be the right choice, considering that children in prostitution are victims of sexual exploitation, the nature of the phenomenon is sensitive and the scale of research is small. This approach is concerned with the pressures and influences that affect children involved in research more than other approaches (Barker and Weller, 2003). It has the ability to minimise any possible risk to the children resulting from the research. In principle, the approach places children at the

centre of the research process, regarding them as socially competent and worthy of investigation (James *et al.*, 2002). It recognises children as knowledgeable individuals, who know about their own worlds more than adults (United Nations, 2000). Adults do not always know everything about children's worlds, what they are doing and thinking (RWG-CL, 2003). This approach would also, be an advantage to the children because it gives them opportunities to address their situation without adult interventions.

This research has been conducted with young women safeguarded from prostitution in two rehabilitation centres. Both centres are located in Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia). In this research, both quantitative and qualitative methods are used. According to Poindexter (2002), the use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is often considered the best and most efficient approach to collecting in-depth and complete information for research, since the two compliment each other and make up for what the other method is lacking. The advantage of using these methods is that they allow such a difficult target group of young women in prostitution to be approached with respect to their rights, vulnerability, safety and confidentiality.

A total of 86 sexually exploited young women were interviewed, representing a total of 100% of the residents in both centres who consented to participate in the research. However, only 63 residents were considered relevant for the research. Of those eliminated, 17 were found not involved in any activity related to prostitution, while 6 young women refused to take part in this research.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows, the age of respondents who participated in this survey. The youngest respondent was 13 years old and the oldest was 18. Nearly 89% of them were 16-18 years old and about 11% were 13-15. The average age of the respondents was 16.95 years old. Young women of 18 years old were the majority of the respondents (44.4%) who participated in this survey.

Table 2 shows, person (s) whom the respondents spent most of their time with during childhood. More than half of the respondents (52.4%) lived with both parents. However, 47.5% were found not living with both parents during childhood, of which 27% spent most of their childhood with a mother, while 20.5% lived either with a father, adoptive guardian or grandparent.

The respondents gave many reasons why they were not living with both parents. About 73% (n = 30)

Table 1: Age of respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
13	1	1.6
14	1	1.6
15	5	7.9
16	14	22.2
17	14	22.2
18	28	44.4
Total	63	100.0

Table 2: The majority of childhood spent with

Childhood spent with	Frequency	Percentage
Living with both parents	33	52.4
Living with mother	17	27.0
Living with father	5	7.9
Living with adoptive guardian	4	6.3
Living with grandparent	4	6.3
Total	63	100.0

Table 3: Abuse and a number of abuses suffered

Types of abuse	Frequency	Percentage
Physical	36	69.2
Emotional	42	80.8
Sexual	26	50.0
Number of abuse		
1	17	32.7
2	18	34.6
3	17	32.7
Total	52	100.0

Table 4: Number of abuser and individuals frequently abused respondents during childhood

No. of abuser	Frequency	Percentage
1	14	26.9
2	23	44.2
3	11	21.2
4	2	3.8
5	2	3.8
Total	52	100.0
Abusers		
Father/stepfather	14	26.9
Mother/stepmother	14	26.9
Brother/sister	10	19.2
Grandparent	5	9.6
Other (Uncle, aunty, brother-in-law, etc)	9	17.3
Total	52	100.0

attributed it to parental divorce, 10% because of the death of one parent and 6.7% because both parents had died. A few respondents stated being adopted by other family (10%) as the reason for not living with both parents.

The incidence of childhood abuse among young women interviewed was high. Of the 63 respondents, 82.5% (52 respondents) reported they were abused during childhood. About 69% were victims of physical abuse, 80.8% of emotional abuse and 50% of sexual abuse (Table 3). Around 67% of respondents were found to have suffered from multiple abuse types.

Table 4 shows, the number of abusers who abused the young women during childhood. Only 27% claimed they were abused by one abuser, while the majority (73%) was abused by >1abuser: 44.2% by two abusers, 25% by

Table 5: Negative feelings suffered from childhood abuse

Negative feelings	Frequency	Percentage
Depression	39	75.0
Useless	10	19.2
Disowned by the family	20	38.5
Wants to get revenge	8	15.4
Hurt and angry	46	88.5
Dirty	17	32.7
Feel nothing	4	7.7

Table 6: Number of negative feelings suffered

Negative feelings	Frequency	Percentage
1	11	21.2
2	8	15.4
3	23	44.2
4	6	11.5
5	3	5.8
6	1	1.9
Total	52	100.0

3-4 abusers and two respondents reported abused by five abusers. About 54% of the respondents professed they were frequently abused by their father/stepfather and/or mother/stepmother. Meanwhile, 19.2% reported of abused by their brother or sister and 26.9% by grandparent, uncle, aunty etc.

Table 5 shows, a list of negative feelings suffered by the respondents as a result of their childhood abuse. Many respondents said the abuse caused them to feel hurt and angry (88.5%), depressed (75%), disowned by the family (38.5%), dirty (32.7%), useless (19.2%) and wanting revenge (15.4%). Four respondents said they felt nothing (did not suffer any negative feelings) from the abuse experienced.

When, examined closely, it was found that the majority of respondents (78.8%) did suffer from multiple negative feelings: 15.4% with two negative feelings, 44.2% with three, 11.5% with four and 7.7% have as much as 5-6 negative feelings (Table 6).

DISCUSSION

The majority of the young women in the current study were found to have suffered from emotional abuse (80.8%) during their childhood followed by physical abuse (69.2%) and sexual abuse (50.0%). A great number of them were found to have experienced multiple abuse types.

The findings are similar to Hunter's study. She found that 85% of the respondents reported having a history of incest, 90% a history of physical abuse and 98% a history of emotional abuse during childhood. Kathy and Rozana's account provides a good example of the phenomenon of emotional abuse at home during childhood among young women involved in prostitution:

It was like living in a jailhouse, though it had always been my home. I did think of running away, but each time I tried, I felt helpless, vulnerable and lost, as I did not have any place to go (Kathy, a prostitution victim at 11 years old).

Three years ago, I thought that by running away from home, I could prove to my father that even without his love and support I would still survive and have a successful life. I was desperately trying to prove that life would be better of without him. That it was wrong of him to divorce my mother and not let me see her. I wanted him to know that he was the worst father in the world. He was cruel, ruthless and hurtful to his own daughter. I wanted him to realise that he had made the biggest mistake in his life by neglecting me and marrying my stepmother. Alas, those things never happened. Instead, I ended up being a prostitute, trading my body for money (Rozana, a 15 years old victim of prostitution).

Somewhat surprisingly, the current study found that the rate of childhood sexual abuse among the sample was lower (50.0%) than previous studies, where 65-95% of young women in prostitution were reported to have had a history of childhood sexual abuse (McClanahan *et al.*, 1999; Shaw and Butler, 1998; Bell and Todd, 1998; Brannigan and Van Brunschot, 1997; Saphira, 2001; Farley and Kelly, 2000; Estes and Weiner, 2002; Bagley, 1999).

For young women who have sexual abuse history during childhood, Saphira (2001) suggests that child sexual abuse and more particularly incest 'trains' young women for prostitution. She argues that the father, in effect, forces the daughter to pay with her body for affection and care that should have been freely given. In doing so, he destroys the protective bond between parent and child and initiates his daughter into prostitution. The social learning theory can explain more about the relationship. According to the theory, childhood sexual exploitation teaches the victim to view herself as sexually degraded-as loose, dirty and/or damaged goods (Brannigan and Van Brunschot, 1997). Prostitution thus, become an option for self-revenge for what they feel about themselves as they believe they have nothing left to lose (United Nations, 2000). The words of Shima who were raped by her brother-in-law typify the responses of many:

In the beginning, I did feel guilty about doing the job. But I realised the job was the ticket to my survival and independence. I knew it was not a real job. Yet, it was better than being raped. I was a rape victim and other people, who have been raped will understand my situation and why I did it. When, you have been raped, you are completely stripped of your self-worth. Life means nothing to you. Therefore, you might as well try the job, as you have nothing to lose (Shima, a 14 years old victim of prostitution).

CONCLUSION

Child prostitution is a social product, a symptom or a metaphor for societal decay, moral corruption and capitalism. It will continue to exist if society allows it, if we do not change our attitudes towards the problem and prostituted children and if we continue to hide the prevalence of child abuse and neglect. It seems clear that for various reasons including societal norms and values, the seriousness of child abuse and neglect (and child prostitution) remains a hidden social problem in Malaysia. However, the problem is one, which society cannot afford to ignore today. It should be brought out into the public so that people can directly and intently look at it and see its potential for immorality, dreadfulness and devastation, which has always been there in the heart of the society. Abused and neglected children may suffer from psychological trauma throughout their lives. They have a high possibility of drowning in prostitution if they do not receive appropriate help and healing for their traumas. There is a need to provide better support and care for children in stressful and difficult home environments and for those who have been subjected to abuse, neglect and violence. Perhaps if more effective social support and care can be extended to at-risk children, there will be less transition to prostitution.

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