

## Betrayal of Trust: The Involvement of Children in Prostitution

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### ABSTRACT

The involvement of children in prostitution is a well known phenomenon but not well understood. The aim of this study was to examine the involvement of children in prostitution. A total of 63 sexually exploited young women participated in this children-centered approach study. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. Respondents' age ranged from 13 to 18 years old. Nearly 89.0 percent of them were 16-18 years old. This study found that the youngest respondent first involvement in prostitution was nine years old. A majority of them entered prostitution at the age of between 13 to 17 years old and more than half were 15-16 years of age. The average age of the respondents' first involvement in prostitution was 15.1 years. Three main reasons for their involvement were boyfriends' deceit, friends' influence, and personal. The study provides a significant implication to social workers on how they should treat children who are safeguarded from prostitution and living in the rehabilitation centers.

**Keywords:** Child prostitution, pimp, enticement, rape

### INTRODUCTION

Child prostitution is not a new phenomenon in Malaysia. But, it is a phenomenon that the public does not really know and understand. In fact many claim it does not exist (Sereny, 1985; O'Grady, 1994). People fail to realize its existence because child prostitution is seen as no different from adult prostitution. Children in prostitution are assumed to have the same moral values and attitudes as women in prostitution and that they are also 'selling' their bodies to men for money (Lukman, 2009a; Jeffreys, 1997; Sycamore, 2000). Most people believe that children as well as women in prostitution choose to break the law and deserve whatever happens to them (Hofstede *et al.*, 1999; Lukman *et al.*, 2011). No distinction has been made between the two groups of females in terms of their age, power, cognitive and psychological ability,

as well as maturity (Sullivan, 2005; Cusick *et al.*, 2003). Like prostituted women, children in prostitution also have been stigmatized, marginalized, criminalized, and treated abusively by the society (Shaw and Butler, 1998; U.S. Department of State, 2000).

Understanding the precipitating factors that make children vulnerable to prostitution does not fully explain how they are drawn into 'the life' (Sullivan, 2005; Cusick *et al.*, 2003; Lukman, 2009b; Klain, 1999). Other related aspects also should be examined. One of the important aspects to consider in the case of children's involvement in prostitution is the 'recruitment processes'. Gray *et al.* (2002) define 'recruitment into prostitution' as the process of selecting individuals for prostitution. There are many ways a child or young woman can be recruited. Often recruitment is accomplished

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through lies, blackmail, tricks, exploiting friendships or relationships, enticement, playing on the financial needs of the person being recruited, intimidation, and peer pressure (Farley and Kelly, 2000; Phoenix, 1999; O'Connell-Davidson, 1998). The recruitment process of young women into prostitution almost always involves adult accomplices, particularly pimps (Estes and Weiner, 2002; Barrett *et al.*, 2000). Pimps are almost 'invisible' from the public eye (Abiala, 2003; Sullivan, 2005). They control the 'business' and play a vital role in exploiting and manipulating prostituted young women (May *et al.*, 2000; Aderinto, 2007). Individuals responsible for recruiting young women into prostitution other than 'pimps' that are frequently mentioned in the literature are parents, relatives, and peers (Barnitz, 2000; Taylor-Browne, 2002; May *et al.*, 2000).

The current study aims to examine the involvement of children in prostitution. Many researchers (e.g., Estes and Weiner, 2002; Farley and Kelly, 2000; Phoenix, 1999; O'Connell-Davidson, 1998; Barrett *et al.*, 2000) believed that children do not voluntarily choose to be prostitutes or involved in prostitution. But, they are victims of sexual exploitation by perpetrators who want to make a quick profit from prostitution (Sullivan, 2005; Cusick *et al.*, 2003; Voss, 1999; Aderinto, 2007; Gould, 2001). The researchers therefore would like to find out the situation of the phenomenon in Malaysia; are children or young women in Malaysia also being recruited into prostitution and who are the ones responsible to bring them into prostitution.

## METHODS

The researchers hypothesized that most of the young women in the research sample would have entered prostitution because of being tricked, forced or trapped by perpetrators. In this research, the use of the children-centered approach would seem to be the right choice, considering that children in prostitution are victims of sexual exploitation. Such method is also for the fact that the nature of the phenomenon is sensitive. The small scale of this research is also the reason for

using such approach. Children-centered 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 minimize 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 recognizes children as knowledgeable individuals who know about their own worlds more than adults (United Nations, 2000; Sullivan, 2005; Cusick *et al.*, 2003). 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 was conducted with the participation of young women safeguarded from prostitution in two rehabilitation centers. Both centers are located in Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia). In this research, both quantitative and qualitative methods were 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 complement each other and make up for what the other method lacks. The advantage of using these methods is that it allows 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, which represents a 100 percent of the total residents in both centers 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 six young women refused to take part in this research.

The youngest respondent involved in this research was 13 years old and the oldest was 18. Nearly 89.0 percent of them were 16-18

years old and about 11 percent 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 percent) who participated in this survey.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study found that the youngest respondent's first involvement in prostitution was at nine years old (Table 1). The majority of them (92.0 percent) entered prostitution at the age of 13-17 years old and more than half (55.5 percent) were 15-16 years of age. The average age of the respondent's first involvement in prostitution was 15.10 years. Up-close, 49.2 percent of the respondents entered prostitution in their intermediate secondary school age (16-18 years), 46.0 percent at the lower secondary school age (13-15 years), and 4.8 percent at the primary school age (7-12 years).

TABLE 1  
Age of entry into prostitution

Age of respondent	Frequency	Percentage
9	1	1.6
11	2	3.2
13	8	12.7
14	7	11.1
15	14	22.2
16	21	33.3
17	8	12.7
18	2	3.2
Total	63	100.0

Most of the young women indicated that the person they 'trusted most' introduced them to prostitution (Table 2). In about 48.0 percent of cases, prostitution was due to their boyfriends' deceit, 38.1 percent were influenced by a friend, two respondents were forced by their mother, and one was persuaded by a relative (uncle). Nearly ten percent however said that they become involved in prostitution as a result of

their own personal decision. Up close, more than half of rape victims in the current study entered prostitution under the influence of peers (Table 3).

TABLE 2  
Ways to prostitution

Ways to prostitution	Frequency	Percentage
Influenced by a friend	24	38.1
Own decision	6	9.5
Deceived by boyfriend	30	47.6
Forced by mother	2	3.2
Persuaded by relative	1	1.6
Total	63	100.0

TABLE 3  
Ways in which rape victims entered prostitution

Ways into prostitution	Rape victims	
	Frequency	Percentage
Influenced by a friend	8	57.1
Thought of it myself	1	7.1
Deceived by boyfriend	3	21.4
Forced by mother	1	7.1
Persuaded by relative	1	7.1
Total	14	100.0

The findings support the hypothesis. The perpetrators were found to be the persons they 'trusted most' who then tricked, forced or trapped them into prostitution. Most significantly they include 'boyfriends', relatives, and their mothers. The 'boyfriend', in this case, is not the one who truly love or care for the young women, or who would willingly protect the young women in any kind of situations. They are pimps who want to take advantage from the vulnerability of the young women by making them "money machine" (Hosey and Clune, 2002; Gray *et al.*, 2002).

A feigned friendship and love is a primary method of procuring a young woman for prostitution (Sullivan, 2005; Cusick *et al.*, 2003; NCMEC, 2002). This method is a classic tactic of recruitment used by pimps (May *et al.*, 2000). Pimps use a systematic plan to gain control of a young woman by gradually luring her away from her support network until she is completely separated from friends, family, and her home (Gray *et al.*, 2002; Aderinto, 2007). In general, the process to recruit a young woman into prostitution starts when a pimp approaches her, befriends her, 'sweet-talks' her, gradually builds a comforting relationship by giving attention and feigned affection and later convinces her 'to be his woman' until she is dependent upon him emotionally or financially (Hay, 2004; Barry, 1995; Hofstede *et al.*, 1999). A pimp is able to detect what is missing in the young woman's life and that makes her vulnerable to become sexually exploited (Gray *et al.*, 2002). During the relationship, she may be seduced with gifts, compliments, and even a promise of marriage or a lifetime commitment (Sereny, 1985; Sorajjakool, 2003).

After making the young woman dependent on him, the pimp slowly separates the young woman from her support group (family, relatives and friends) and introduces her to drugs and alcohol (Gray *et al.*, 2002; Hay, 2004). At this stage, the pimp begins to dominate her, eventually establishes control, and forces her into prostitution, either on the streets or in an indoor place (Saikaew, 1996). Some women may realize they are victims of prostitution the minute they are forced, but many take a long time to realize it (O'Connell-Davidson, 1998; May *et al.*, 2000; Roman *et al.*, 2002). Often young women regard what they do or they are told to do as a form of 'sacrifice' for their 'love' relationship, and they continue to think of the pimps as their 'boyfriends' (Klain, 1999). This happens because the emotional bond between the young woman and her pimp affects her perspective taking abilities. She does not regard those who benefit from her prostitution earnings as a pimp, rather as a 'boyfriend' or 'partner'

(Department of Health, 2000; May *et al.*, 2000). Tipah's account provides a good example of this process:

*It all started when I met and fell in love with a guy whom now I will hate for the rest of my life. I was 16 years old and was studying in form four at secondary school. He was 25 years old, good looking and a sweet talking young man. Every time he came to see me, he would bring me a present ... It felt really nice when someone thought you were very special, cared and tended to your needs and confessed that you were always in his heart ... I was pushed to give myself to him as prove of my never-ending love for him ... After two months, he showed his real character; aggressive, bad tempered, rude, insolent, foul-mouthed, and so on. At that time, I realized that he was not sincere, and not committed to marrying me ... In the hotel I was drugged and raped ... When I woke up, I was in a room with nine other young women, three Indonesians, five Thais, and one Chinese. I asked one of the Indonesian young women where was I. She told me that she also did not know where she was. She believed that I was sold to the same man who controlled the prostitution syndicate in the hotel. My heart was broken when she told me about that.*

(Tipah, a 16-year-old victim of prostitution)

Pimps or boyfriends also recruit and mingle with young women who desire money or desire what they believe will be a glamorous, comfortable and exciting lifestyle (Scott, 2002). Initially, pimps often promise these young women money, a car, nice clothes and jewellery (Roman *et al.*, 2002; Estes and Weiner, 2002). Young women who are addicted to drugs are also vulnerable to being recruited (Lukman, 2009a; Hosey and Clune, 2002; Spangenberg, 2001).

Peer influence was found to be the second most important way in which young women entered prostitution. Nevertheless, the percentage found in this study was lower (38.1 percent) than the result (60 percent) found by Schetky (1988). Some peers work independently in prostitution and they influence other young women to get involved to follow their lifestyle. They may do this because of loneliness and the need for friends while involved in prostitution (Spangenberg, 2001; Hunter, 1994; Duong, 2002). They introduce these young women to prostitution as 'an adventurous' way to make money to survive, or to make more money than they could possibly achieve by legitimate means (Cusick *et al.*, 2003; Finkelhor and Ormrod, 2004). Often, peers 'provoke' or 'feed' these young women with stories of the exciting, glamorous life on the streets, as well as with outward signs of being 'successful' in their pursuit of their victims – nice clothes, pretty jewelry, pagers and mobile phones, easy access to drugs, a network of adult friends who take them to 'grown up' places (e.g., night clubs, bars, holiday trips) and adults who 'protect' them from harm by others (Saphira, 2002; Estes and Weiner, 2002;). Some children, especially those living on the streets, in poverty and in desperate living condition, are easily seduced by the 'exciting' stories of prostitution by their friends, particularly when their friends showed material evidence of what they already achieved from prostitution (Lukman, 2011; Gray *et al.*, 2002). However, other peers may influence young women for their pimps because they are asked to do so (Estes and Weiner, 2002).

The current study also found that more than half of rape victims entered prostitution under the influence of peers. 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; Lukman, 2009b). They are easily influenced when they meet up with

friends who are already in prostitution, or who know an 'adventurous' way of making money for survival. Shima explained this process in the following way:

*After a few months living with Anna, she suggested that I should find a job. I told her that I would be very happy to work, but without any certificate how was I to get a job and who would want to employ me? I was then only 14 years old. To my surprise, she put the idea for me to take up the job. I told her that I was too scared and was without any experience to do the job. However, she pointed out that the job could easily make me rich ... In the beginning, I did feel guilty about doing the job. But I realized 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-year-old victim of prostitution)

## CONCLUSION

The majority of young women had been betrayed, tricked or coerced by perpetrators and influenced by friends to engage in prostitution. The nature of 'choice' is greatly debated in the context of children's involvement in prostitution. Adults may choose prostitution as a career deciding for them what is good and bad for their life. But, children do not 'choose' a life of prostitution. They lack awareness and have limited social, emotional, and intellectual development to understand fully their actions and make responsible choices. Instead, they are lured, coerced, enticed or forced into a life of prostitution by adult due to their immaturity,

helplessness, and weakness. Although some children may claim to be acting 'voluntarily', in reality this cannot be considered voluntary or consenting behavior. For the vulnerable and often victimized children, there may be too few alternative options to choose from.

The study has given a significant implication to social workers on how they should treat children who are safeguarded from prostitution and living in the rehabilitation centers. These young women have been betrayed by persons they trusted. Social workers have a challenge to lay trust back into the young women self in order to develop their self-esteem and self-worth. For future research, it is important to study the effect of prostitution on children psychologically and socially for social workers to fully understand them and to provide the best intervention process for them to recover from the dark life of prostitution.

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