

EXPLORING CHALLENGES AND NEEDS OF SEX WORKERS' CHILDREN

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Abstract

Whether it is seen as an exploitative industry preying upon the poor and vulnerable or a social need fulfilled by men and women who sell sexual services, there is a common victim that is often overlooked in the sex industry: the children of sex workers. This article aims to explore and understand their experiences, challenges and needs. The study interviewed 10 children of sex workers from Lorong Haji Taib, a well-known red light district in Kuala Lumpur. The findings highlight the negative effect of the industry on children, though it does not stop the children from being optimistic about their future. Among other things, they also communicated their constant fear of being discriminated against by larger society if found out to be children of sex workers. This study provides a voice for the children of sex workers and hopes that social work interventions will be developed along the lines of what they say is needed to improve their lives.

Keywords: *Children of sex workers, sex work, Malaysia, poverty, stigma and discrimination*

Introduction

The term sex work is defined as providing sexual services in exchange for money or other material goods. This activity can take multiple forms, but in this paper, the focus is on street sex work, which represents the most degrading form, where the person practising it is exposed to multiple forms of abuse and stigmatization by society (Mandiuc 2014:2; John-Fisk 2013: 121). Sex work is often shrouded in stigma and perceived pejoratively. Rarely do we look upon sex workers beyond the stereotypes and see them “not only (as) sex workers...” but as “partners, friends and community members” (William & Antonia 2010: 1). Even more uncommon is the representation of sex workers as mothers or to focus on the experiences and needs of their children. There has been research on the role of sex workers as mothers (Jacob 2008; Pardeshi & Bhattacharya 2006; Sloss & Harper 2004; Dalla 2004; Das 1991). However, research on children of sex workers is limited (Weisberg 1996: 277).

In Malaysia it is difficult to ascertain the exact number of children of sex workers. The lack of recognition of sex workers as “mothers” leads to gaps in research and intervention projects targeting these children. Many are unable to receive the required support to break the cycle of poverty and sex work. Consequently only a few have the opportunity to a better future (Barry 1998:2; Valandra 2007: 44). Sex work is looked at differently throughout the world, but people

are slowly starting to notice the trauma that can affect children whose mother is a sex worker (Bronfenbrenner 1992: 187). The study aims to fill a gap in the literature, to provide an empirical understanding of their experiences and needs. This is a qualitative study conducted among the children of sex workers in Lorong Haji Taib, a red light area in Kuala Lumpur.

Previous research regarding sex work in Malaysia have focused on the risks, antecedents and prevalence of sex work. Lukman (2009) uses historical records in his study, identifying economic growth in colonial Malaya in the 1800's as the reason for an increase in prostitution. This economic growth was attributed to the expansions of tin mining and rubber plantations which in turn resulted in the mass immigration of Chinese and Indian male labour into Malaya. This phenomenon caused a demographic imbalance whereby men in mining towns and plantations overwhelmingly outnumbered women. . Hui (2001) found that there was an increase in the trafficking and exploitation of women for the purpose of sex work to meet the sexual demands of the male emigrant workers. Sex work continues to thrive in contemporary Malaysia, partly facilitated by changes in immigration policy such as multiple entry visas (MEVs) for Indian and Chinese nationals as well as the growth of foreign students in Malaysian higher education. Though the source of supply for sex workers may be different than in the previous century, the reasons for entering prostitution have remained the same. There are multiple push factors for women entering sex work, some voluntarily and others involuntarily (Qayyum et al. 2013: 403; Augustin 2007). Voluntary factors include poverty, a decline in economic conditions, illness in the family, debt, sex for enjoyment, peer association, family neglect, domestic clashes, and drug addiction in husbands. For involuntary participation or factors, forcing them into sex work includes rape, sexual assault, early marriage, trafficking, and deception. When the social infrastructure collapses as a result of war, famine and economic crisis, women turn to sex work as a last resort (Weiner 1996: 8).

Malaysia being a Muslim majority country sees sex work as a problem with negative impacts on the image of the country (Nasir et al. 2010) and deemed illegal (Mikhail 2002). Furthermore, indirect involvement in sex work, such as pimping or living on the earnings of sex workers, is also illegal (Ramachandran et al. 1990: 334). In spite of the illegality and stigma of sex work in Malaysia, it remains available, albeit discreetly. It has grown alongside the national economy and has prospered quietly in hidden places without much public acknowledgement (Brown 2001: 7; Barnitz 2000: 62). Almost all cities and small towns have sex for sale, though it has developed differently in different parts of the country (Abdul Hadi 1987: 41). Many sex workers are brought into Malaysia from other countries such as China, Indonesia, India and the Philippines (Nasir et al. 2010: 36). According to Edlund and Korn (2002), the International Labour Office's study has estimated that between 0.25 and 1.5 percent of the female population are sex workers, and between 2 and 14 percent of the gross domestic product are represented by the sex sector in Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines.

Nagaraj and Yahya (1998:90) state that sex work in Malaysia is a gender inequality issue.. Women in the sex industry are portrayed as dirty, low class, shameful, deviants and people who are seen to promote immorality (Weitzer 2000:91). According to Jacob (2008: 20), sex work has different meanings for different groups in society as each group tends to interpret it according to the dominant values of its culture. Hence, it is difficult to find a single set of meanings of sex work that can satisfy everyone across cultures and religions (Dalla 2004: 190). For our purpose here, a sex worker refers to someone who earns her living from offering sexual services. We want to turn the focus on the children of sex workers. How are these children perceived by others outside the sex industry? How do sex workers play their role as mothers? How do the children perceive themselves? And, how do they feel about their mothers and sex work? Beard et al. (2010: 1) and Hughes (2004: 35) reviewed a large range of literature on the vulnerability and resilience of the children of drug users and sex workers. The study found

that the children of sex workers are vulnerable and face the risk of separation from parents, sexual abuse, early sexual debut, introduction to sex work as adolescents, low school enrolment, psychosocial issues arising from witnessing their mother's sexual interactions with clients and social marginalization.

Methodology

This article applies a qualitative approach to explore and understand the lived experiences and needs of children whose mothers practice street sex work. Our study focused on the perspectives of the children. The participants were asked two open-ended research questions:

1. What are the experiences, educational challenges and needs of children of sex workers?
2. What types of services do they need to overcome these challenges?

Participants

The research interviewed 10 children ranging in age from 13 to 18 years old whose mothers are sex workers along Lorong Haji Taib. Of the children 6 are female and 4 are male. They belong to different nationalities and ethnicities with some unaware of their country of origin. The respondents lived with their mothers in Lorong Haji Taib. Their exposure to formal education ranged from primary to secondary schooling. The children shared their experiences as children whose mothers are sex workers, their relationships with their mothers, friends, teachers and their siblings. They talked about their challenges in school, living conditions and family environment. They also identified the support and programs organized by NGOs which they felt they needed in order to be successful in their lives notwithstanding the home conditions and maternal responsibilities.

Most of the participants are children from mixed marriages. Children of a Malaysian mother and an undocumented immigrant father in Malaysia or children of a divorced Indonesian undocumented female worker in Malaysia will be without a birth certificate or other legal documentation. Under Malaysian law, immigrants, especially foreign workers, are not allowed to marry during their stay in the country. As a result, immigrants, documented or otherwise, do not register their marriages but utilize customary laws or religious norms to sanctify their unions. Consequently, the children are ineligible for state documents. If the parents' divorce or if the father abandons the mother, the child remains unregistered. This situation creates a mass of poor, paperless children who are invisible to the state. Adding on to the problem is that fraudulent documents are commonplace at the local level in societies where the status of its residents is at best ambiguous (Sadiq 2010: 387).

A few of the participants had successfully gained citizenship as one parent is a Malaysian and their marriage was legally registered in Malaysia. If the mother is not Malaysian but the biological father is, and they are legally married, the child will be eligible for a Malaysian birth certificate. These children would then be eligible for schooling at the *Sekolah Bimbingan Jalanan Kasih (SBJK)*, a special school set up by the government. This is a vocational school programme. However, if the same couple did not marry legally, then the child will take up his or her mother's citizenship.

Collection of data

Our prior work with sex workers has highlighted a number of problems these children face that triggered our interest in this research. Sex workers and their children were informed about the purpose and objectives of the research, and consent was sought before the respondents took part in the interviews. An appointment was fixed at a time and date convenient for the children. The interviews lasted between 45 minutes and 50 minutes and were conducted in a coffee shop nearby where they live. All the participants were informed that their participation was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study at any point during the interviews. For ethical reasons, all personal information such as names and contact information will remain confidential.

Data analysis

The interviews were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The entire data were interpreted using thematic content analysis. The interview identified various themes such as educational challenges, teasing, discrimination, challenges in the community, under-privileged living conditions, support from NGOs and housing conditions. We also asked them on challenges they faced, relationships with their mother, discrimination, future endeavours and if they could recommend programs which they felt were needed.

Findings

The participants of this study all identified themselves as children of sex workers, who were either born in Lorong Haji Taib, the wider Chow Kit area, Kampung Baru or Sentul. A few participants who were refugees or immigrants claimed they were born in the birth country of their mothers. All participants received support services from non-profit organizations in the neighbourhood. These services included a pantry program, after-school tutoring and an in-house literacy program. The findings illustrate themes regarding the effects of sex work on the lived experiences of these children. It also reveals the needs of the children who are under the care of a sex worker mother.

Challenges in school, the community and non-profit organizations

Of the 10 participants, 6 were registered with public schools and 4 studied at in-house literacy programs offered by NGOs. However, these children were beset by illiteracy, poor grades due to their stateless and refugee status, large class sizes and lack of teachers in schools, difficulties in concentrating due to their family and housing conditions, stigmatization and discriminations by other children in NGOs and in public schools, as well as language barrier. One of the participants, AB (14 years old, male, Indo-Malay, mixed parents) was unable to read and write in Bahasa Malaysia and English:

"I cannot understand the language...I can read single letters but cannot say...cannot pronounce."

He claimed that he is illiterate because his education was interrupted when he relocated from his home country to Malaysia. There is no one to give him individual attention in the NGO

in-house literacy program as there were insufficient numbers of teachers and volunteers. CD (13 years old, male, Indo-Malay, mixed parentage) concurs:

“...yes...they combined the 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th grades together and the rest of the grades together...one teacher teaches them all...that’s why.”

“...same teachers will teach all the subjects. I cannot understand...”

Another participant, EF (13 years old, female, mixed parentage), state that her teacher speaks very little or no English at all. She claims that she performed poorly in the class because the teaching is done in the local language which is Bahasa Malaysia and it is not her native language. Two of the children migrated from different countries and do not speak the local language here and thus unable to understand what is being taught at school:

“I cannot understand Science and Maths...the teacher explains in Malay for my friends...Exam papers are also in Malay sometimes...I am trying to understand certain words but very difficult.”

GH (14 years old, female, mixed parentage) enrolled in primary 4 when she emigrated here three years ago because of the lack of school certificates from her old school since her mother was trafficked by a stranger from her village. Furthermore, there is no standardized examination or entrance examination that the children can take to prove their scholastic competency, nor were there any remedial classes for these children to learn the language to catch up with their peers in their grade.

“I studied primary 6 and sat for the major examinations back in my own country, but since I do not have any certificates as proof, I had to start from primary 4 again here. It’s very different here...”

The interviews also bring to attention the living environment, often characterized by poor conditions, inadequate facilities for child development which in turn translates into the children experiencing difficulty concentrating on their studies. Living in such conditions of impoverishment is related to the low earnings of their mothers which are also used to support their spouse’s vices such as for cigarettes, alcohol and drugs.

“...I followed my mother and changed places few times in a year...changed new friends and schools...I cannot concentrate...” (IJ, 17 years old, male, mixed parentage)

“...I want my own house...” (MN, 15 years old, female, mixed parentage)

“...my mother’s friend always asks me to buy cigarettes...she cannot see me holding a book...my mother gave him money for that.” (IJ)

“I can hear my mother fight with her boyfriend...because no money...they are very angry...I take book and go to NGO...” (MN)

“My mother doesn’t have enough money to pay the rent for a larger room. She gave all her money to her boyfriend...he bought liquor and cigarettes.” (OP, 14 years old, male, Malaysian)

Three of the participants found it difficult to study in the community as there are fights between sex workers, drunk people roaming the area, and disruption from drug dealers who make it hard for them to concentrate on their studies.

“...so I go to (NGO) after school...” (KL, 16 years old, female, mixed parentage)

“...a lot of noises...play hard rock music... I don’t understand what I’m studying at all...” (OP)

“It’s crowded...strangers...they asked me to get things for them...” (RQ, 15 years old, female, mixed parentage)

Four participants expressed their dissatisfaction regarding the environment in which they live, and claim that, to live in a peaceful environment with adequate privacy as a right. They describe their living spaces as overcrowded and noisy, affecting their studies:

“It’s only a room...I sleep and study on arm-chair...” (EF)

“...there is not enough room for me and my sister to study...” (ST, 17 years old, female, Indo-Malay, mixed parentage)

“House is also very small. I cannot study there, no space.” (AB)

“...too many people in my house...they use harsh words...I cannot remember anything...” (KL)

The interviews also raised their concerns about being disturbed by other children at school. KL said:

“...there are a few boys who love to disturb me studying there (NGO)...I get angry and reported to social workers...but they don’t listen ...” (KL)

AB shared her concern about the behaviour of a few children at the in-house literacy program which led to a teacher resigning:

“...the teacher used to teach very well...[but] the students caused a lot of mischief with her...made her cry, two, three times. Then the teacher walked away.”

Stigmatization and discrimination

One of the issues raised in the interviews is the choice to keep their mothers’ occupation a secret from their friends. They did so in order to prevent teasing and discrimination from their peers in school and in NGO centres. Teasing and stigmatization exposed the children to feeling vulnerable and distressed. The children also claimed that teasing leads to fighting and name calling.

“...I fight them...they called me prostitute’s son...” (CD)

Another participant was harassed by an adult who wanted sexual favours from her in exchange for money:

“...he was trying to bribe me RM20...he followed me till the (NGO)...I reported to the social worker...” (ST)

Two participants repeatedly changed residences in order to prevent stigmatization and marginalization to which the children were exposed to when others found out their mother's occupation:

“...they would not feel good (if they were to find out)...we planned for us to go somewhere else...” (OP)

“I gave my address in school...other students saw it and they teased me...” (RQ)

Relationships with their mothers

All the participants lived with their mothers. They shared how their mothers cared for them and protected them. They expressed concern for their mothers' work, health, needs and support. They spoke of being apprehensive about their mothers' partner. These children also articulated a desire not to be separated from their mothers, and how they wanted to support their mothers.

“There was a raid once in my area, luckily my mother spoke to the police, then they left me alone, otherwise they could arrest me.” (EF)

“My mother always shouts at the guy who often disturbs me...” (KL)

“When my mother speaks about her job, I cry. When I speak to her, she gets emotional.” (GH)

“My mother never laughs with us, but we love her so much.” (MN)

“Right now, my mother needs rest...” (AB)

“I want her to have a harmonious residence of her own and spend time with me...” (EF)

The children also shared about the care and supervision arrangements that their mothers are forced to make in order for them to be able to work as street sex workers. Often they were left in the care of relatives or care services. In three of the cases, the children expressed their satisfaction with these arrangements, stating that they feel safe. In two of the cases where the mothers were in a stable relationship, the partner, who was also the declared father of the child, took over the care of the child when the mother was out working on the streets. There were also cases of abuse by their mothers' partner. One respondent states:

“My mother was mostly out. I used to stay with him. He began to behave violently as he was angry with my mother. He hit me” (OP)

However, not all partners were reported to be violent. Some were also described as being caring and being able to properly substitute the mother during her absence:

“He took care of me since I was small. He does everything that my mother does. He washes me, put me to sleep and prepares me food....” (RQ)

They claimed that their mothers are able to set clear boundaries between being a sex worker and being a mother. They do their best to avoid bringing their work into the home environment and to shield their children from the specifics of their work:

“I know that my mother goes to work at night, but I never suffer because of that. My mother never exposed to me anything that she does at night.” (GH)

The participants of the study were aware of their mothers’ profession and were angry towards the people who pushed their mothers into the sex trade. But from the perspective of two of the participants, their mothers’ parenting responsibilities was to provide for their basic material needs, resulting in the perception of increased compatibility between the roles of mother and sex worker. They explain that for their mothers, using the income from sex work to meet the children’ material needs justify their continued profession as sex workers. They claimed that their mothers’ continued profession in sex work is evidence of strong maternal feelings:

“I am crazy about all the fashionable gadgets and clothes. And my mother was willing to buy me anything using the money that she earned every day. She said that it was the only way for her to prove her love to me and that she is fulfilling her duties as a mother towards me.” (ST)

One of the participants, MN, claimed that her mother often expresses her wish to stop engaging in sex work:

“She said she would like to go out and work. Not prostitution, but something else. She wants to buy a house for me.”

The children also claimed that their mothers experienced varying degrees of neglect and harassment. They described their mother’s lives as being hard and painful and recognised that they needed help.

“Once, my mother got abducted by her boyfriend and locked in a wardrobe for two days. Luckily, the police found her after they heard her banging the wardrobe doors.” (AB)

“He beats her. Her eyes swelled up.” (OP)

“I was born when my mother was fourteen years old. A man raped her and she ended up in prostitution. She worked every day whether she is ill or not, whether she was menstruating or not...” (ST)

Even though the children were aware of the physical and psychological risks faced by their mothers and the risk that they themselves were in, they still wanted to be with their mothers.

“I don’t want to go away from my mother. No one has the right to separate me from my mother....” (CD)

The children not only wanted to be with their mothers, but also expressed their desire to take care of them.

“After SPM, I want to look for a job, and get a new room, move in with my mother...I already have a plan. I want to reduce my mother’s burden, take care of my brother and sister.” (KL)

“I want my mother to quit from the job in the future, I will try make some money ...I can try do a business or we can always go back to our own country when I save enough money.” (AB)

All the participants expressed tremendous love and concern for their mothers. They wanted a better life for their mothers and wanted to support them in their old age. They also hoped for a better relationship between their mothers and their extended family members. They know however, that their mothers’ occupation may hinder reunification with the extended family.

Expressions and Aspirations

The participants in this study were well aware of the challenges, but it did not stop them from aspiring for a better future. All of them shared similar aspirations, what they need to do to achieve that dream, and what support they need to help them fulfil their dreams. The participants also spoke of the type of programs that would help children like them especially programs organized by NGOs. At the same time, they are aware of the hard work they have to put in to achieve their dreams.

GH’s ambition is to become an astronaut. She said she “will study well and get good marks”. She wanted to further her studies in university where she can sit for exams, learn computer skills and about the galaxy. But she is an undocumented child. Her mother cannot secure legal status for her. She seeks help from institutions that could play a role in helping sex worker mothers to secure the legal status of their children in the form of birth registrations.

“... In my dream, everything is possible. But a dream is just a dream. I wish I can become an astronaut when I grow up... Like any other teenagers, I can and I will study well and get good marks. But what is the point if I can’t further my studies in a university. I was informed that I cannot get my identity card, thus unable to further my studies...” (GH)

EF claimed that therapists are very important in “helping them to recover from stressful childhood surrounded by sex work”. She said she “has written numerous pieces about the effect that her mother’s involvement in sex work had on her development”. This form of therapy, expressive writing, has been powerful for many victims. PT Foundation organized a series of workshops for children living in Kuala Lumpur red light areas in which children talked about their experiences through the act of drawing. According to EF, “most of the children focused

on topics like violence, abuse, sex work, stigma, trafficking and HIV/AIDS". EF hopes that NGOs will create an interactive advocacy and counselling project as well. She suggests they write a book in which she and her friends can express their feelings and concerns as a method of therapy as well as to promote children's rights. She was hoping that her ability to express her experiences and feelings would help other children:

"Attending therapy sessions with the nearby NGO helped me a lot...My friends and I feel free and we shared a lot about our experiences as a sex workers' children. Sometimes we cannot express our feelings, thus we draw... I still have the collections of my drawings with the NGO... I wish in the future, I can become a facilitator with the NGO, helping kids who are like me..." (EF)

Listening to the voices of children in formulating aid

The children voiced their hopes that more organizations would help provide care for them. Children's rights awareness is very low in their area, but they claimed that NGO community outreach programs as well as services for children are slowly becoming available to many. MN mentioned that she sees improvement in the children that have been moved to safe homes. But she does not want to stay away from her mother. She is hoping for more organizations that could develop programs focused on primary schooling, adult literacy, and health services in their area. AB was very concerned about the unhealthy environment surrounding his living area. He wants NGOs working in his area to provide health care and awareness programs, and distribute contraceptive pills and condoms:

"There are a lot of HIV cases here. They don't know how to perform safe sex... some cannot afford to buy condoms or contraceptive pills. So many children lost their mothers."

CD was concerned about saving money to further his studies. He suggests that a saving scheme can be organized with support from NGOs so that he and his friends can develop a habit of saving money. He adds that these savings should only be accessed at the age of 18 and used for livelihood programs or for pursuing tertiary education.

Shelters for children are reluctant or do not take in children of sex workers. Besides, children from red light areas do not want to stay away from their mothers and siblings. At night, children, particularly infants, are most vulnerable when their mothers are busy entertaining clients. For this reason, it is important to establish night shelters in their vicinity which are accessible to their mothers.

"I went there before...They said I'm older now, cannot stay anymore, not enough space. I think there must be night shelters for us, especially teenage boys and girls, also for small kids..." (IJ)

IJ mentioned that she needs support and love from her mother. She really hopes that her mother's partner will not abuse her mother. She also needs financial assistance, or at least people to assist her to save her earnings from a part-time job.

IJ also mentioned that no woman in her right mind chooses to prostitute herself. In her mother's case, her boyfriend, who turns out to be a drug dealer, lured her in. When she discovered she was tricked, escaping from that life was difficult and dangerous. She was threatened with violence and was manipulated with lies. She also suffered beatings and rape. She wanted to leave immediately, but by then, the decision was out of her hands. In order to leave her boyfriend, she needs a home or safe place and a job to support her children.

“My mother and other women in prostitution need a job so they can get better income, enough to support their need. Only then can they quit prostitution.”

The findings here indicate that these children are articulate, reflexive and intelligent. Given the right support, they can perform well at school. Their aspirations are remarkable despite all the obstacles in their lives. The narratives convey the various support these children need for a better future for themselves, their mothers and their community.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to explore the needs of children whose mothers are street sex workers. From our discussion, we find that the mothers' occupation as sex workers influence the wellbeing of the children. A few children who were interviewed found their mother's job embarrassing. They felt ashamed and guilty as their mothers continue working in the sex industry to provide for their material needs. A few participants also claimed that their mothers were able to separate work from everyday life, between playing their maternal role and being a sex worker. They also claimed that the sex work itself does not affect how their mothers raise them.

Despite efforts by their mothers to shelter their children from the reality of their work, the findings indicate that poverty, alcohol use, drug abuse and a violent family environment, remain as factors which shape the lived experiences of children living in red light areas. This correlates with Sloss, and Harper (2004:329) and Alexander (2005:153) who agree that sex worker mothers acknowledged the risks to which they exposed their children, while being under their care. The interviews also brought to attention the children's inadequate home conditions, which are unable to meet the needs of children. If mothers frequently resort to changing domiciles due to economic instability or to avoid being stigmatized, it can disrupt the child's psychological stability and their possibility for social integration (Hughes 2005).

The research shows that the children's academic performance in school is affected by the mothers' job as a sex worker. Although the women have registered their children in schools, these efforts were undermined by factors external to them, such as poverty, overcrowding at home, lack of documentation, language barriers, stigma and discrimination. Discovery by others of the mother's occupation can also lead to the marginalization of the child. In the final section of the findings, we discuss how answers provided by the children on needs and support can contribute to future social work intervention strategies. The children view their mother's ability to provide financially for them as a positive indication of parental responsibilities. Here we attempt to bring into focus the complexity of understanding the needs of children of sex workers. These findings highlight the needs of the child are inextricably linked to their mother's work. Therefore it is important to understand the difficulties faced by mothers who are sex workers. The pimps or boyfriends have control over their reproductive health, the women and their children are often estranged from extended family members and stigmatized by society. Thus, in recognizing the needs of these children, civil society should offer support for their mothers, to empower them so that they can provide a secure home environment to raise their children.

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