Silent Cry of Dying Childhood and Children of Street Based Sex Workers in Dhaka City, Bangladesh

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Abstract: Many female sex workers in Bangladesh get pregnant willingly or even unknowingly but face dire situation raising the child. Children of the female sex workers in Bangladesh are at risk of many significant threats to their health and wellbeing. While some of these problems are shared with other children of similar social and economic circumstances in Bangladesh, children of sex workers experience a range of problems due to the social stigma and threats associated with their mother’s sex work and the resulting discrimination. Very limited studies have been undertaken to bring to light the life of these children. The current study tries to depict the life of the street based sex workers’ children in Bangladesh.

Introduction

Parents have to go through various issues that hinder parenting, among those, poverty, lack of social support, substance abuse, homelessness, poor health, income insecurity and inadequate social support (Drake and Pandey, 1996; Tracy, 1994; Sloss and Harper, 2004). Being a parent and street based sex worker, individuals who exchange sex for money or drugs on the street, has to go through all the stress issues as well (El-Bassul et al., 1997). Their hazardous and stigmatized occupational involvement also generates stress that can only be understood by them (Shedlin and Oliver, 1993; Sloss, 2004). These daily stressors include victimization, difficult clients, and police harassment (Dalla, 2000; Farley and Barkan, 1998; Miller and Schwartz, 1994; Sloss and Harper, 2004; Valera, Sawyer, and Schiraldi, 2001). Beside the uninsured job their life is hindered due to continuous accommodation instability and financial difficulties. With these difficult moments is added another, that of bearing and raising up children of their own (Dalla, 2000; Sloss and Harper, 2004). Studies conducted by Patriott (1994) and Dalla (2002) show that more than 50 percent female sex workers carry out the baby in full term if they get pregnant.

The children of sex workers can face unique risks, stigma and discrimination, as a result of their parents’ profession. A study conducted by Save the Children in 2010, depicted various situations of the children of the sex workers as they are denied safe home, child care, health care facilities and education thus suffering numerous health problems, live a life of malnutrition, unwanted pregnancy and various mental health problems. Also, gender based violence, abuse and trafficking is very common for the children of sex workers. Children of the sex workers face serious threats of abuses

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and exploitation (Willis, 2007; Beard et al., 2010), as many face ill treatments such as getting sold when infant, forced into sex trade and drug business. Various factors directly contribute to their vulnerability and marginalization. These are the lack of education, inaccessibility of basic needs, proper safe housing etc.

In spite of such odds most sex workers tend to have a sizable number of children. In a Chicago study 91% of the women involved in sex trading had children, averaging 3.4 children each (Sloss, 2002). In a large sample of 1,963 street sex traders in New York, 69.4% had children, averaging 2.25 children each (Weiner, 1996). According to Dalla (2000), 88% of the street based sex workers had children, averaging 2.4 children each, with some having as many as seven. Researchers in Mexico City led focus groups with 133 female commercial sex workers and found that many of these women had children and found managing their “double-lives” as mothers and sex workers difficult (Castaneda, Ortiz, Allen, Garcia, and Hernandez-Avila, 1996).

There is limited data on children of sex workers generally, and specifically in Bangladesh, because they are a “hidden” population and conducting a census is difficult (Beard, 2010). Their situations in Bangladesh have been described in two anthropological studies, one using data collected in 1993-1994 (Blanchet, 2006) and the other with data collected during 2005-2006 (Arefeen, 2006). Much of the literature and programme implementation focus on the vulnerability of the sex workers towards AIDS and STIs. Their private life is never revealed to the world let alone the deep sadness and strife over parenting responsibility and social stigma that lead to a life of desolation for many. In this paper we try to focus on a few case studies of their plight.

**Method**

To bring out the life stories and provide numerical support the study was conducted using mixed methodology. In consonance with the conceptual framework, an in-depth interview schedule was constructed to collect data from the primary sources. In acquiring the accurate story of the relevant cases a checklist was also made as a part of data collection technique. Data were collected from a field study carried out during October –December 2008, using mixed instruments i.e. survey questionnaire, semi structured in depth interview, Key Informant Interview and FGD.

The study was conducted in various areas of Dhaka city, wherever existence of street based sex trade occur. The primary data source locations were Ramna Park, Osmani Uddyan, Parliament area, Farmgate Park, Gulshan Lake, Gabtoli bus stand, Saydabad bus stand and Sadarghat terminal. From these locations a total of 85 sex worker mothers were surveyed, 12 in depth interviews (7 with Sex Worker mothers, 2 with NGO workers, 3 with children of sex workers), 4 KII and 3 FGD were conducted (1 with Sex Worker mother, 1 with NGO worker, 1 with children of sex worker).

Sampling of target population for this study was chosen purposively and for qualitative part snowball sampling was utilized. The main focuses of this study were the condition of the children of the street
based sex workers and their life and living condition. Targeted participants for the study were chosen who met the criteria of the study objectives;

- Street based sex workers who have children
- Street based sex workers who have children living with them
- Street based sex workers who have children living with relatives
- Children of the sex workers over 12 years old.

**Ethics and consent**
All the activities of this study were consistent with recognized codes of research ethics, rooted in the Declaration of Helsinki (WMA, 2008). Potential participants were provided with information sheet in Bengali, which was read to them and conformation were taken that participants fully understood the nature of the study. Sufficient time was allowed for considering participation, and then a consent form was provided to the women and children who agreed to participate in the study. Due to its sensitive nature acknowledgement was made that there would be no opportunity to blame the participating sex workers, nor there would be any threats or risks towards the children. The conduct of the data collection was framed around sensitivity, tact, empathy, and ensuring that the participants’ needs were met (Dickson-Swift, 2008).

**Findings**
The study findings are divided in two parts, first we go through some numeric data and later a few qualitative, phenomenological stories in support of our quantitative findings.

**Socio Demographic and Economic situation of Street based Sex worker**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Frequency (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 18 years</td>
<td>5 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-23</td>
<td>14 (15%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24-28</td>
<td>25 (29%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29-34</td>
<td>18 (21%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35-39</td>
<td>16 (19%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40+</td>
<td>7 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85 (100%)</td>
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</table>

Age is considered the most important factor in this trade. The younger you are the more attractive your clients find you. Among the study respondents 34 percent are young sex workers aged from 19
to 23 years. We have found 6 percent underage sex workers roaming the street. This number is quite large, but we fail to recognize it just because they lack age documentations. Among our respondents 8 percent are seniors in this trade who age over or near 40 years. However, when they grow old they tend to move away towards the top of the business chain and try to take control over younger sex workers and grab business spots. As they age, they tend to change their trade settings, although at young age they prefer to roam the streets, with time they are more interested in hotel trade.

Out of 85 respondents, 29 percent turned out to be living a conjugal life, although unspoken whether their spouses know about their double life. A majority reported they have either divorced (22%) or separated (14%) from their life partners. Only 29 percent were single.

According to our respondents they enter in the business at very early age, some started in the various brothels then either they fled or started independent business as free agent. Getting away from the powerful hand or madam/mashi is not an easy task.

It takes years of savings to pay the hierarchy a compensation to leave or start trade at a new locality. Among our study respondents, 48 percent were in this trade for 6-10 years while 31 percent are in this business near about 15 years. The data trend shows a declining rate of involvement at street level trade as one gains in age as the trade is extremely demanding. Most of our study respondents are going through their peak time.

Income from the trade is erratic with no guaranty of a standard daily income. Thus, poverty remains a constant companion. Situation and context plays the most important factor with an average income of Tk. 25-100 depending on the economic level of the client, while 34 percent respondents earned between
TK.1550-2500 in the last month. Only 5 percent reported of income level over Tk.5000 thousand. In total 29 percent had income ranging between Tk. 2550- 4500 in the previous month.

With income level such sporadic and uncertain, each respondent mentioned that they have to calculate every step while doing the expenditure for living. House rent is always a big concern and thus 44 percent reported they live alone to save money in this area. Also living alone is helpful for business. Another 31 percent reported living with children as they have no one in Dhaka city to look after their children. Living with partners or fellow sex worker has been reported by 9 percent for both cases. Only 7 percent reported of living with parent or relatives. But whatever the living arrangement, they maintain a life of hardship and yet send money for their family and support them financially.

According to our respondents, 62 percent do not live with their children and they have justified their reason with many aspects. About 45 percent reported that mother’s occupation plays a bad effect on children’s mind when s/he gets the idea. Another 16 Percent feels ashamed due to their profession.
According to the 72 percent respondents, their children live with their grandparents or any close relatives at village home or any other district. They go to visit their children every two or three months, and nobody suspects anything. They rather have an image of empowered working women making their way towards economic solvency. When asked, majority of the respondents mentioned that relatives and neighbours think that they either work in garment factories or as house maid in some posh areas of the capital.

Table 2: Reason for not living with children

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Feel shameful</td>
<td>14 (16%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child ask too many questions</td>
<td>7 (8%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bad effect for children</td>
<td>38 (45%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bad for business</td>
<td>21 (25%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No response</td>
<td>5 (6%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85 (100%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to most of our respondents, they do not want their children to follow their foot step. Among 85 respondents 33 have female child and they fear their daughters might get dragged into this profession. Of these 25 of the mothers having a female child mentioned that they have seen or had received complains that their client’s/neighbor’s have touched their daughter or verbally abused them.

At times the female child of the sex workers receives verbal/symbolic signs of sexual invitation regardless their age. For the male child sexual assault, verbal assault, getting involved in drug business or to become a drug user at an early stage of life is very common. The graph below show results of answers about potential harm faced by their children.
Much of the information collected from qualitative part of the study has similarity with findings in other limited studies on children of sex workers in Bangladesh and in other countries. Stigma, one of the root causes of the problems of children of sex workers, is closely associated with sex work. This stigma is manifested as discrimination that creates barriers for securing shelter, health care, and education for the children of the sex workers.

Discrimination and harassment against mothers automatically results in discrimination against the children. There are indirect consequences of this discrimination; for example, when mothers are evicted from their apartments and their children experience the impact of this discrimination because they also lose their housing. At some level, however, there is also direct discrimination against the children of sex workers because of who they are, not just because of what their mothers do.

... i don’t like to go outside my slum’s boundary, people point finger....call me names...sometimes kids of my age swears bad statements against my mother. ...(Razu*, 13)

Because sex workers are acutely aware of the stigma and discrimination against them they make significant efforts to hide their work from their families, children, landlords, neighbors, schools, parents of other children, and health care professionals. These mothers described the pressure on hiding their work and how it also makes them miserable. This pressure and misery would seem to have an

* Pseudonym has been used in all cases
impact on the mothers and, over the long-term, may result in depression, further compromising the ability of the mothers to care for their children.

I have two more siblings... I am the elder one. Mom sometimes stays out of home... days... even for weeks... I take care of my siblings, when she is not here. (Ershad, 16)

Although many stated that when they stay out of home it's not that they don't care for their children. Rather their intentional separation occurs as they predict potential harm to their children and feel relieved that their children are safe and no longer at risk of being abused or neglected by locals.

I miss my baby girl... but for sure I know she is safe with my mother... I visit her every week... her safety and wellbeing is what keeps me alive. (Reena, 26)

Most street based sex worker mothers who keep their children with them or do not have the option of care by family in the village and providing safe child care is a constant challenge. When family support is not available, sex workers rely on neighbours, other sex workers and madams to watch over their children while working. When left in the care of madams, participants stated that the children are subjected to verbal and physical abuse by the madams and forced to have sex with other clients.

I used to work in Narayanganj terminal... sometimes I left my 10 year old girl with another sex worker... that day I came home early night... and found one man was banging my house door, my girl was screaming for help... she (the other sex workers) send her client to have sex with my daughter. (Meena, 36)

The respondents have mentioned that both the male and female child run the risk of getting abused due to their mother’s work nature. For the girls symbolic/verbal invitation for sex is very common from the age of 10 and boys have the life of drug dealers awaiting them. Their existence is taken for granted as depicted;

Me and my brother want to die daily...... I cannot tolerate people’s lust and signs towards me... they think “magir baccha to magi hoybo (child of a sex worker will become a sex worker)”.... The mastans at slum trade drugs with the help of my 6 year old brother.... if I or my mother ask them to stop, they threaten me (Masuda, 14)

Threats/vulnerabilities particular to children born to sex workers are very common, abuse and exploitation, discrimination and violence, and factors that increase their likelihood of also engaging in exploitive or commercial sex, including stigma and marginalization, are some issues they cross path daily. Due to the stigma associated with their bold line most are denied any rights and standard living,
from the study data we have managed to identify several areas where the children of sex workers are being discriminated. Trafficking and kidnapping are other aspects for the children of sex workers. Lack of safe housing/shelter is a common problem faced by sex workers and their children. Due to the low income and identity exposure possibility force a sex worker to look for rentals in slums and in most cases children are either left unattended or someone takes the responsibility in return for a favor. This opens doors for opportunistic people who are eager to take advantage. According to our data, Mothers' inability to secure housing also meant that children were sometimes left in the care of madams/neighbours where they were subjected to physical and sexual abuse (Khan et al. 2008).

For girls, sexual exploitation was common while boys were more likely to engage in criminal activities. Marriage is one of the important social institutions in any society, but this remains a painful experience for the daughter and mother. As their identity disclosed none want to marry the daughter and if the secrets are kept well hidden, at later dates when revealed the daughter of the sex worker is abandoned by her husband and in laws. For the boys, no one wants to have any relation with a child of sex worker thus no employment opportunity which drift him further into criminal activities. Participants reported that children suffer emotionally when people make unpleasant comments about their mothers. Participants also reported that children get very upset when they witness abuse of their mothers by the police or clients.

Rights of education are also denied to the children of the sex workers. If the mother’s identity is known, the school authority will not take his application and if others know the secret they will keep humiliating the child so much so that s/he will decide to leave school on own accord. Also the amount of education expenditure is another barrier for the poor sex worker mother. Another area of discrimination is securing birth registration since birth registration requires the name of the father, which often is not known, many sex workers cannot register the birth of their children. Lack of birth registration impairs the ability of these children to access education and social services as well as the legal protection it provides.

Conclusion

The data of the study reveal that to address the needs of children of sex workers we need to focus on the provision of shelter, education, and decrease stigma and discrimination. Their mother’s occupation drives them to social isolation and exclusion. Children of sex workers face significant threats of abuse and exploitation. Many are at risk of being traded as infants, forced into sex work as young adolescents and face trafficking. In addition, poverty accompanied by stigma and discrimination, creates intense effects on safe housing and access to basic services. Lack of education and other opportunities of accessing reproductive and sexual health information increase the likelihood that these children might become victims of sexual exploitation and/or forced into sex work. All of these factors contribute to a greatly elevated risk of immediate and long-term physical
and mental health problems as well as other serious social handicaps that affect the life prospects of children of sex workers in many settings. These mothers and their children face extreme circumstances and risk; without effective intervention and support, their future is austere.

The interventions that are adapted from the recommendations of the respondents suggest the need for multifaceted assistance to mothers and children across several categories, such as educational facilities for children and a safe place to play, study, or sleep when their mothers are working, peer support, nutrition, housing and healthcare. Also, we should tend to introduce programmes that will provide vocational training and alternative income generation opportunities to mothers who want to leave sex work and with this option we need to think seriously about providing them with new identities in the society. If the old identity gets disclosed then no matter how hard we try or how much intervention we establish every effort will go in vain.

Our approach to the situation of children of sex workers in Bangladesh provides a new dimension separated from HIV and AIDS or marginalization and social exclusion rather it is built on the new perspective of the rights of children. Birth registration, education, and being protected from sexual exploitation, among others, are the rights that are largely unfulfilled. Solutions to the problems of children of sex workers must include a rights-based approach. Only then we will be able to say we have managed a better future for all children.

Reference


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