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Research article

An initial exploration of prostitution of boys in the West African region



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ABSTRACT

There is limited research on child prostitution in Sub-Saharan Africa, particularly as it relates to boys. An international research study on child prostitution was conducted in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Niger. A descriptive, cross-sectional research design with a survey method was used to collect data. Convenience sampling was used to recruit the participants. A total of 709 children in prostitution participated in the study, including 261 girls in Benin, 243 girls in Burkina Faso, and 192 girls and 13 boys in Niger. This paper presents only the findings about the subsample of 13 boys. The findings show that most boys lived with their families while practicing prostitution. Sexual abuse and sexual assault were the main adverse childhood events experienced by most boys prior to prostitution. There was no indication of involvement of pimps in the sexual transactions of the boys. There was a high level of awareness of risks and consequences of prostitution among the participants. Consistent condom use was reported by almost all the boys. Most of the participants experienced violence not only from clients and people in the community, but also from the police. Implications for practice, policy and research about boy prostitution are discussed.

1. Introduction

The social environment in which child prostitution occurs may be dissimilar, but this phenomenon, which violates human rights as well as children's rights, is prevalent in both developed countries and developing ones. According to the Article 2(b) of the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children* of 2000, "Child prostitution means the use of a child in sexual activities for remuneration or any other form of consideration." Child prostitution is the most clearly identifiable manifestation of commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC), which also includes the following interrelated forms: child pornography, child trafficking for sexual purposes, and child sex tourism (ECPAT International, 2008). Referring to a child in prostitution as a sex worker is misleading because these terms hide the criminal exploitation committed against the child and imply that the minor has somehow chosen to be in an exploitative situation she or he is biologically and psychologically immature for. In any situation of prostitution, a child is a victim of sexual abuse, and thus should be designated as child in prostitution or prostituted child, instead of child prostitute or (child) sex worker.

As an issue of child abuse, child prostitution is rarely explored in Sub-Saharan Africa (Ennew, 2008; Lalor, 2004). Worse, in opposition to other regions in the world, male prostitution in general and boy prostitution in particular, remains a highly circumvented issue in the region. In almost all African countries, the pervasiveness of boy prostitution is rarely admitted or raised as an issue because of deeply rooted, gender-defined, religious, and sociocultural values (ECPAT International, 2007; Ennew, 2008; Lalor, 2004; U.S. DOS, 2013). This paper explores the characteristics of boy prostitution in the West African region and various issues

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related to this hardly discussed type of CSEC. It aims to contribute to the development of new knowledge on key aspects of child prostitution in the sub-Saharan African region.

2. Literature review

Whereas a large part of the literature on CSEC documents the conditions of girls in prostitution, there is a general disregard of woes experienced by boys in prostitution (Dennis, 2008; Frederick, 2010; Jones, 2010). Globally, studies that specifically focus on boys in prostitution are very few. Reflecting on the overlook of boy prostitution among researchers, Willis, Robert, and Friedman (2013) stated, “Discussion of boys as victims or survivors of CSEC is often appended to a discussion about commercially sexually exploited girls. A panel discussion about commercial sexual exploitation often ends with these words: ‘...and boys too’” (p. 4).

The limited research available about boys in prostitution primarily focuses on regions such as the Americas (i.e., United States and Canada), Europe (i.e., United Kingdom, Netherlands, etc.), and Southeast Asia (i.e., India, Pakistan, and Afghanistan). Curtis, Terry, Dank, Dombrowski, and Khan's (2008) study stands out as breakthrough research about the prevalence and characteristics of boy prostitution in the United States. The study showed that more than 45% of prostituted children in New York City were boys. This finding was corroborated by Willis et al. (2013) showing that close to 50% of children in the sex trade in the same city consisted of male minors. In some countries in Southeast Asia, such as Afghanistan and Sri Lanka, boys are more likely than girls to be found in prostitution (Akula, 2006; Muhammad & Zafar, 2006; U.S. DOS, 2013).

One of the most significant factors of vulnerability of boys to prostitution is homelessness, which results from interrelated issues such as sexual abuse, homophobia, and discrimination members of this population often experience. Many young males in prostitution escaped physically and/or sexually abusive home environments (Akula, 2006; Bastedo, 2015; Bittler, 2002; Curtis et al., 2008; Ennew, 2008; Estes & Weiner, 2001; Gwadz, Clatts, Leonard, & Goldsamt, 2004; Lankeau, Clatts, Welle, Goldsamt, & Gwadz, 2004). Others who self-identify as gay left their families because of homophobic environment (Coleman, 1989; Curtis et al., 2008; Estes & Weiner, 2001; Legros, 2005; Quintana, Rosenthal & Krehely, 2010; Walls & Bell, 2011; Willis et al., 2013). Boys in prostitution are overrepresented among the homeless youth population (Clawson, Dutch, Solomon, & Grace, 2009; Quintana et al., 2010; Reichert & Sylwestrzak, 2013). They engage in commercial sex primarily as a situational response to homelessness (Bastedo, 2015; Curtis et al., 2008; Estes and Weiner, 2001; Gwadz et al., 2004; Reichert & Sylwestrzak, 2013; Walls & Bell, 2011; Whitbeck, Hoyt, Yoder, Cauce, & Paradise, 2001).

Prostituted boys are rarely under the control of pimps (Curtis et al., 2008; Moxley-Goldsmith, 2005; Quintana et al., 2010). According to the Merriam Webster's online dictionary, a pimp is “a criminal who is associated with, usually exerts control over, and lives off the earnings of one or more prostitutes.” A pimp exploits prostituted persons by controlling them through various strategies including violence and coercion, and keeping all or a large part of their incomes from the sex trade (Williamson & Cluse-Tolar, 2002). One of the activities of a typical pimp is to bring individuals into prostitution through pandering, which is defined as enticing, procuring, forcing, or coercing a person to become a prostitute (Freiburger & Marcum, 2015). Prostituted boys sometimes have go-betweens who facilitate their sexual transactions by helping them find clients in exchange for negotiable rewards (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2004; Moxley-Goldsmith, 2005; Quintana et al., 2010). UK-NSWP (2004) found that most adolescents and youth males in prostitution in the United Kingdom were not coerced or trafficked; nor did they have pimps who controlled their movements and sexual transactions. Yet, their commercial sexual activities were occasionally facilitated by intermediaries based on some agreement. Akula's (2006) study of boy prostitution in Hyderabad (India) highlighted a very limited presence of pimps in sexual transactions with boys. Thus, most prostituted boys are active agents in their practice and rarely passive victims (Cates, 1989; Coleman, 1989; Curtis et al., 2008; UK-NSWP, 2004). They have a great level of independence over their involvement in prostitution.

The independence and active agency of prostituted boys could explain the widely shared belief that boys do not practice prostitution. According to Willis et al. (2013), “The little notice given to boys primarily identifies them as exploiters, pimps and buyers of sex, or as active and willing participants in sex work, not as victims or survivors of exploitation” (p.4). This perception results in a disregard of this subpopulation of children in prostitution by law enforcement and victim service agencies. Thus, when arrested, prostituted boys are charged with prostitution in far less proportion than prostituted girls, and are instead often charged with other crimes than prostitution (Clawson et al., 2009; Curtis et al., 2008). Being overlooked among the population of children in prostitution has a setback for male minors as they are less likely than female minors to be referred for rescue and assistance by the police or social services agencies (Finkelhor & Ormrod, 2004; Frederick, 2010; Jones, 2010). Not only do law enforcement and victims' services agencies often fail to treat prostituted boys as victims, but boys themselves are often averse to self-identify as victims of commercial sexual exploitation due to feelings of humiliation and shame (Keziah, 2013). Such feelings are often linked to social construction of masculinity that perceives males only as sex buyers, thus complicating their access to assistance and health services they may need in any geographical context included sub-Saharan Africa.

Boy prostitution in the sub-Saharan Africa region is hardly explored and often cursorily discussed in studies primarily focused on girls (Chatterji, Murray, London, & Anglewicz, 2004; Hounmenou, 2016; M'jid, 2008; RAPCAN, 2011; Wade, Alhouseini, & Seidou, 2010). RAPCAN's (2011) study conducted in the Cape Town, South Africa, explored child protection service providers' understanding of the sexual exploitation of boys in relation to other forms of sexual abuse. The findings of this qualitative study showed that boys in prostitution were unable to access supportive services due to both their own reluctance to seek help and service providers' limited awareness of the issue of boy prostitution. M'jid (2008), a review of research on sexual abuse and exploitation of children in West and Central Africa, included reports of cases of boy victims of sexual abuse and commercial sexual exploitation, especially through sexual tourism. According to M'jid, in some African countries, boys who are victims of rape could be punished by law for having homosexual relations. Wade et al. (2010) conducted a rapid assessment of female sex workers aged 15–49 years and men having sex with men

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