



Research article

Exploring child prostitution in a major city in the West African region



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ABSTRACT

The study explored the characteristics of child prostitution in a major city in the West African region. A convenience sample of children in prostitution, specifically girls below age 18 ($n=243$), were recruited on 83 prostitution sites identified in Ouagadougou, the capital city of Burkina Faso. A survey instrument, consisting of 71 closed-ended question items, was used to explore various variables including profile of children in prostitution, factors of vulnerability to prostitution; prostitution practices, compensations and related issues in child prostitution. The findings show that most children in prostitution in the city were from Burkina Faso (63%) and Nigeria (30%), two countries that do not share borders. Most native respondents practiced prostitution for survival and to support their families. In contrast, all the respondents from Nigeria practiced prostitution as victims of international sex trafficking. An important finding was that 77% of the children in prostitution surveyed were educated. Among the respondents, there were similarities in the major life events that contributed to their situation of prostitution. These life events include early separation with parents, sexual abuse, foster care, and forced marriage. Implications for policy, practice and research are discussed.

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Child prostitution is prevalent in all major cities in the Sub-Saharan African region (ECPAT International, 2014). Yet, there are limited reliable data about this problem. By its geographical position of being at the heart of West Africa, Ouagadougou, capital of Burkina Faso, could be considered a hub of prostitution in the region. Approximately 5200 women are involved in prostitution in this city of a population of 1,915,102 people (INSD, 2012). In 2011, approximately 500 sites with high risk exposure to HIV/AIDS were surveyed, including brothels, restaurants, hotels, and entertainment clubs (ATUJB, 2011). In 2008, 70 prostitution sites were identified through a census (Commune de Ouagadougou, 2010). The identified sites were residences and/or workplaces of about 1500 women of various nationalities and ages. A major issue with the above-mentioned statistics is that prostituted girls were commonly counted and assimilated with adult women in prostitution. Research that focuses on the prevalence and characteristics of child prostitution in Ouagadougou was needed. In response to such a need, a comparative research study aiming to explore child prostitution and its relationship with child migration was conducted in three countries in the West African region. The present paper, based on that research, specifically analyzes the characteristics of child prostitution in Ouagadougou.

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1. Literature review

Commercial sexual exploitation of children (CSEC) consists of four forms: child prostitution, child pornography, child sex tourism, and trafficking of children for sexual exploitation (Albanese, 2007; ECPAT International, 2014). According to Article 2(b) of the *Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography* (2000), child prostitution – the most prevalent type of CSEC – is “the use of a child in sexual activities for remuneration or any other form of consideration.” This definition also implies children having sex with adults in exchange for basic needs like food, shelter, protection, or in exchange for favors such as higher course grades or extra spending money. In this paper, the terms “child in prostitution” and “prostituted child” are used to describe children involved in prostitution. This review covers research about CSEC in the Sub-Saharan countries because of similarities in the findings about the problem in that region.

CSEC in the Sub-Saharan region became a major topic of research less than two decades ago, particularly after the first World Congress against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children in Stockholm in 1996. Until the late 1990s, there was hardly any focus on CSEC in Africa (Ennew, Gopal, Heeran, & Montgomery, 1996). Researchers and activists in Africa believed this problem was difficult to delineate. It was often claimed that the concept of CSEC could not be applied in the African context because the distinction between sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, and commercial sexual exploitation could not be clearly defined in analytical terms neither within studies, nor within cultural understandings (Ennew, Gopal, Heeran, & Montgomery).

Much of what is known about CSEC is based on a synthesis of media articles as well as reports often commissioned by U.N. agencies and international NGOs. The hidden nature of the sex trade as well as taboo and stigma attached to sexuality in many African societies could partly explain the limited research about CSEC (De Sas Kropiwnicki, 2012; ECPAT International, 2014). The knowledge stemming from empirical research that gathers data directly from CSEC victims in countries in the Sub-Saharan region is limited (BEFOR, 2014; ILO, 2001; Niyonzima & IBCR, 2012; Perschler-Desai, 2001; Tadesse & Hoot, 2006).

The literature shows that child prostitution is more prevalent than any other forms of CSEC in the West African region (ATUJB, 2011; Bambara, 2011; BEFOR, 2014; CIPCRE, 2009; SP/CNLS-IST, 2011). For instance, BEFOR (2014) found that child prostitution was the most common form of CSEC in a convenience sample of 1472 children aged 10–17 in five cities in Mali. Child prostitution in African countries involves primarily girls from various socio-professional categories including students, apprentices, street vendors, waitresses, domestic maids, etc. (ATUJB, 2011; Bambara, 2011; CIPCRE, 2009). The phenomenon takes place in several places including private residences, parking lots, hotels, restaurants, brothels, and even prisons (Niyonzima & IBCR, 2012).

Research about the causes of widespread CSEC in the Sub-Saharan region is largely anecdotal (Ennew et al., 1996). Poverty is found to be the underlying factor driving CSEC across the region (Bambara, 2011; Bédard, 2005; Compaoré, 2007; Coulibaly, 2010; ECPAT International, 2014; ILO, 2001; Perschler-Desai, 2001). It is not uncommon to find children who practice prostitution in order to support their families (BEFOR, 2014; Coulibaly, 2010; ECPAT International, 2014; ILO, 2001; Perschler-Desai, 2001). Family dysfunction and population displacement are other factors identified as making children increasingly vulnerable to CSEC in some countries (BEFOR, 2014; ILO, 2001; Luty, 2010; Perschler-Desai, 2001). Children who are maltreated or neglected often flee their homes and become involved in the sex trade. Children displaced from their homes or separated from their families due to conflicts are considered at increased risk of involvement in CSEC (BEFOR, 2014; Niyonzima & IBCR, 2012).

Most research identifies sexual abuse as a major life event conducive to CSEC (BEFOR, 2014; De Sas Kropiwnicki, 2012; ECPAT International, 2014; Gnandi, 2007; Lebbie, 2007). For instance, BEFOR (2014) found that involvement of most children in CSEC is often the outcome of a long process that often begins with sexual abuse they have experienced around ages 9–11. In a sample of 1472 children surveyed about CSEC in that study, 37 percent experienced sexual abuse before being involved in prostitution. Apart from sexual abuse, the following childhood situations or events are highlighted by the literature as impacting involvement of children in prostitution in the Sub-Saharan region: foster care, domestic work, lack of parental support, child maltreatment, forced marriage, school dropping out, and illiteracy (Bambara, 2011; ECPAT International, 2014; Gnandi, 2007; Lebbie, 2007; Mikhail, 2002).

HIV/AIDS pandemic is another social issue found to be closely associated with the prevalence of CSEC. First, children who are orphaned due to this disease are often forced to take on the role of primary breadwinner for themselves and their siblings, leading them to engage in the sex trade (ECPAT International, 2014; Perschler-Desai, 2001). Second, HIV/AIDS is a key factor in the commercial sexual exploitation of underage girls because they are considered less likely to have that disease and would be easier to persuade to have unprotected sex (U.S. DOS, 2014). Thus, very young and virgin girls are much in demand and command high prices among sex buyers (Ennew et al., 1996). However, the literature hardly highlights any major presence of sex trafficking networks in CSEC in Sub-Saharan countries. For instance, BEFOR (2014) did not find any visible human trafficking networks involved in CSEC in Mali beyond individuals including brothel managers, hotel managers, family members, and guardians that played the role of go-betweens in the sex trade involving children.

Yet, existing studies about CSEC do not provide a sound analysis of the scope and characteristics of this phenomenon in African countries. The studies were often conducted with very small samples, and they do not help comprehend major issues that are common to the victims. Thus, there is a need for larger research that furthers the knowledge of CSEC in distinct regions of Sub-Saharan Africa by directly surveying CSEC victims from different backgrounds in major cities. The present

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