

Victimisation among those involved in underage commercial sexual activity

MIRIAM SAPHIRA AND AVERIL HERBERT

With the passing of the Prostitution Reform Bill (2004) into law, New Zealand has been able to amend the Crimes Act 1961 to fully ratify the ‘Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention’ adopted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in June 1999. The ‘worst forms’ of child labour addressed by the Convention include: all forms of slavery, prostitution, pornography, the use of children for illicit activities, and work likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children.¹ The Minister of Labour, the Honourable Margaret Wilson, said in a press release on May, 2000:

The Convention aims to raise the standards of protection for children against very grave forms of exploitation, and has a strong human rights dimension. New Zealand participated actively in the negotiations on the Convention and we have a consistent record of being a supporter of children’s rights (Holm, 2000).²

‘Child sexual abuse’ is defined as contacts or interactions between a child and an older or more knowledgeable child or adult (stranger, sibling or person in a position of authority, such as a parent or caretaker) when the child is being used as an object for the older person’s sexual needs. These contacts or interactions are carried out against the child using force, trickery, bribes, threats or pressure.³ Monetary payment or equivalent in a sexual abuse situation may be a risk factor in child prostitution.

Child sexual exploitation or child prostitution has been defined as ‘the use of a child for sexual purposes in exchange for cash or in-kind favours between customer, intermediary or agent or others who profit from the trade in children for these purposes [parent, family member, procurer, teacher etc].’⁴

The term ‘sex work’ is the preferred term of Australian sex workers’ organisations, but it is considered less appropriate for young people.⁵ Sex work implies a degree of formality and identification where the sex worker plans their sex work, knows the monetary value of their service, has some power to negotiate the type of service and

is represented by organisations. The experience of young people in sexual activities, which usually occurs on the fringe of the sex industry, is a different one.⁶

There are numerous hazards involved in undertaking commercial sexual activities. These include rape, assault, demands to have money refunded after sex, robbery, abduction, refusal to drive the worker back to the street, and refusal to wear condoms. These risks were reported in a previous New Zealand study where the streets were seen as more dangerous to work on than in massage parlours.⁷ Many children begin their involvement with commercial sex on the streets. Plumridge found that young people, while alert to the risks on the streets, discounted these dangers as they did not accord with their self-image as streetwise and in control.⁸

One New Zealand study of 303 sex workers in Wellington and Christchurch found that 83 per cent reported experiencing at least one violent incident while working.⁹ Higher rates of childhood penetrative sexual abuse have been found among women and transgenders involved in commercial sexual activity than women who have other occupations.^{10,11} It has been suggested that performing sex for money may by its very nature cause psychological distress such as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).^{12,13,14} Sex workers employ dissociation and other ways of cutting off, such as the use of tranquillisers, to protect their sense of self from violation. This suggests that the work undertaken may be abusive to psychological wellbeing.¹⁵ Dworkin suggests that violence is experienced not only as a punishment and control mechanism but also serves to consolidate the women's feelings of worthlessness and invisibility.¹⁶

Once involved with the sex trade, young people will use coping strategies, developed as children, to contend with the trauma of these hazards. Women involved in prostitution talk about psychological and physiological methods that they use to protect their self-concept.¹⁷ Most avoid kissing, they learn to dissociate and they concentrate on making tricks as short as possible. There has been no evidence to suggest that this is different for a younger age group.

Young people involved in underage commercial sexual activity are very likely to have a family background of disruption, psycho-social problems, physical abuse by family members (51 per cent) and sexual abuse (38 per cent).¹⁸ This abuse was more likely to include penetrative sex than the abuse found in a random sample of women.

The Dunedin and Wellington sex workers (no ethnicity given) in the Potter, Martin and Romans study ‘were more likely to have been exposed to a high level of personal abuse stress as young girls’.¹⁹ This often led to them leaving school early with lower qualifications, having early pregnancies and reduced work opportunities. In addition to leaving home before completing school, they left what should have been a nurturing environment, and the oversight of a mature adult.

Young people involved in underage commercial sexual activity have in the main already been influenced by older people associated with the sex trade.^{20,21} Their youthfulness and disruptive backgrounds, combined with a lack of social maturity and experience, leave them vulnerable in violent situations.

Aim

This study looks at childhood sexual abuse and violence in the lives of people who began their involvement in the sex trade before the age of eighteen years.

Method

Questionnaires were distributed and/or interviews were held in the Auckland, Northland and Waikato regions. Forty-seven forms were completed. The questionnaire was developed in consultation with medical and psychological researchers and Maori community workers in South Auckland. Completed questionnaires were returned from brothels, private workers, New Zealand Prostitutes Collective drop-in centres, former workers from a snowballed sample and from street workers. Ethical approval was obtained from the Health Funding Authority Ethics Committees for the Auckland and Waikato Regions. Reporting sexual assault or childhood sexual abuse in a written questionnaire or in a one-off interview can make the person feel vulnerable and under reporting is expected in these circumstances.^{22, 23}

The average age of the forty-seven respondents was twenty-four years and ranged from fifteen to forty-seven years. There were thirty-seven females, three males and seven transgender. At the time they started having sex for money, 81 per cent of respondents were living away from one or both of their parents. There were twenty Pakeha (43 per cent), nineteen Maori (40 per cent), five Pacific Peoples (11 per cent) and three people who came to New Zealand as childhood immigrants (6 per cent).

Results

The lead-in question in the interviews was about verbal abuse. Of the twenty-five respondents who were interviewed, nineteen reported being verbally abused and seven reported being hit by the client.

Table I: Number of Participants Reporting Verbal Abuse and Physical Assault

	Verbal Abuse	Physical Assault
Yes	19	7
No	6	1
Total	25	8

All the respondents (N=47) were asked if there was an occasion, after they had begun having sex for money, when they were forced to have sex when they did not want to. This had occurred for 77 per cent of the respondents. For thirteen of the thirty-six (36 per cent) this had happened on more than one occasion.

Respondents who used their own home for commercial sexual activity were subjected to a high rate of assault (see Table II). Some assaults left the person unconscious. One had been badly knifed in an attack and spent some time in hospital recovering. Another described being forcibly auctioned in a brothel. In addition to sexual assault, several respondents talked about being picked up in a car and being dropped off after sex at a place different from where they were picked up.

Table II: Place where Sexual Assault Occurred

Place where Participants Reported Sexual Assault	Total
Own Home	11
Brothel	6
In a car	4
On the street	3
Thrown out of speeding car	2
In a taxi	2
Total	28

Few escaped sexual assault. Ten respondents became injured during sex for money and found their client refused to stop and injured them further. A further eight respondents found that their client became

violent and refused to pay. A further two respondents were assaulted by the police, one was gang raped and another reported being drugged and raped. Due to the small numbers of respondents in each category no clear trend emerged as to whether those who were involved in commercial sexual activity at an earlier age were more prone to disclose sexual assault than those that began later. Although it has been noted that indigenous children are more vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation,²⁴ there was no difference in the ethnicity or gender of those who were sexually assaulted. There were differences with regard to those who had been subjected to childhood sexual abuse, who were more likely to experience further assaults.

Table III: Age of First Sex for Money and Reported Incidence of Sexual Assault

Age Of First Sex For Money	Reported Incidence of Sexual Assault	No forced sex	Total	% incidence of assault by age group
12 years old and under	4		4	100
13 & 14 years old	10	3	13	77
15 years old	6	4	10	60
16 & 17 years old	16	4	20	80
Total	36	11	47	

In 21 per cent of instances a condom was used when the sexual assault occurred. There was an expectation that those who had been assaulted without protection may have sought and received more medical assistance but this was not supported by these respondents. Most of the respondents carried on without help. Those who received support at this time were those who required medical treatment for their injuries.

Exploring the incidence of childhood sexual abuse, 59 per cent of respondents in the current study disclosed childhood sexual abuse compared to 38 per cent in the Dunedin study.²⁵ There were ethnic differences in the rate of disclosure. Seventy-four per cent of Maori disclosed sexual abuse as a child compared to 40 per cent Pakeha and 60 per cent Pacific People. The high numbers may be related to openness to disclose in a one-off interview rather than actual rates in the community. Another explanation may be that young people in

this group did not get access to ACC counselling at an appropriate time. Subjects were not asked whether they had accessed support prior to becoming involved in commercial sexual activity. (Sensitive Claims counselling is only available to the individual person who has been assaulted and not to whanau. Provision for individual assistance may not be taken up so readily when viewed as a more collective or whanau responsibility.)

Two New Zealand studies of prevalence (showing a sexual abuse rate of between 10 per cent and twenty-five per cent) were carried out only on a South Island population which has a different ethnic mix, fewer transient people and less-crowded urban areas.^{26,27} More recently, national adolescent research has recorded a rate of unwanted sexual events as between 24 per cent and thirty-one per cent.²⁸

The likelihood of secondary victimisation is noted in therapeutic discourse on childhood sexual abuse.^{29,30}

Table IV: The Relationship of Current Sexual Assault Associated with Sex For Money and Prior Childhood Sexual Abuse

	Prior Childhood Sexual Abuse	Sexual Assault Associated with Sex for Money	No Sexual Assault Reported
Yes	27	23 (85%)	4
No	20	13 (65%)	7
Total	47	36 (77%)	11

There was some support for the notion that childhood sexual abuse may lead to further victimisation. Subsequent rapes were reported by 85 per cent of the group who had disclosed childhood sexual abuse as compared to 65 per cent of the group who had not disclosed childhood abuse. In this study, only four of those disclosing childhood sexual abuse did not report being sexually assaulted since beginning commercial sexual activity.

Conclusion

In this study, over half disclosed childhood sexual abuse and over three quarters had been subjected to at least one sexual assault. Verbal and physical abuse was also common. No sub-group or ethnicity was less likely to be assaulted. Lacking maturity, social experience and family

guidance, many young people found themselves in difficult and violent situations. Embarking on sexual relationships before developmentally mature thinking had been achieved may have heightened their vulnerability to engaging in commercial sexual activity.

Few of those who had been sexually assaulted since engaging in commercial sexual activity sought or received assistance. Help was generally received only if hospital treatment was necessitated.

With the new laws on prostitution the police have less power to randomly visit brothels. Random police visits to certain street sites may result in identifying child sex workers but to date there have been no prosecutions of the men who sexually use children on the streets, nor have there been strategies set up to deter them. 'The real problem is not that children and young people are involved in prostitution but that adults (the majority of whom are men), are actively seeking out these young people to sexually exploit. These children are not on a level playing field with adults'.³¹

AVERIL HERBERT is a clinical psychologist with a 30- year career in mental health, welfare and education. She has been actively involved with Maori arts and conservation issues and has contributed to publications in these areas. Professional appointments have reflected her commitment to Maori advancement and bicultural development. She is currently Maori counsellor at Waiariki Institute of Technology in Rotorua with research responsibilities and she continues in an associate role in psychology at Waikato University.

MIRIAM SAPHIRA has qualifications in Clinical and Educational Psychology and has worked with violent and sexual offenders for many years. She has been involved in feminist issues since 1973, campaigning against the sexual abuse of children, working for Broadsheet, writing articles, books and exhibiting art. She wrote the first lesbian book in New Zealand and more recently carried out research into lesbian health. She has written five books, edited two anthologies, as well as writing three poetry books.

Notes

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