

Young People Abused through Prostitution: Some Observations for Practice

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This paper discusses the situation of young people sexually exploited through prostitution noting the semantic and practical shifts that have occurred in relation to this issue as it has risen up the political agenda in recent years. It explores what we know about the context in which the commercial sexual exploitation of young people occurs, the scale of the problem and the processes through which young people become involved. The paper then considers what these young people might need in terms of practice responses if they are to be supported out of prostitution.

Keywords young people; commercial sexual exploitation; prostitution; child abuse

Introduction

This paper offers some research-informed observations on the problem of young people exploited and abused through prostitution. It begins by noting the extent to which this issue has recently moved up the political agenda and comments on the semantic and practical shifts that have occurred as a result of this. The article then goes on to examine the context in which the commercial sexual exploitation of children and young people takes place, the scale of the problem and what we know about the process of becoming involved. It then considers what young people abused through prostitution might need in terms of supportive interventions and concludes by suggesting how practitioners might appropriately respond to these needs.

Recognizing the Problem

Until relatively recently, the problem of young people sexually exploited through prostitution was consistently denied (see for example, Lee and O'Brien, 1995;

Barrett 1997; Brown and Barrett 2002). It was not a problem that practitioners and policy makers were willing to confront. When the problem was acknowledged, it was thought that it was one that involved just a few 'bad girls' in isolated areas of the country - London, Birmingham and perhaps Manchester, for example. It was thought that the way to tackle the problem was to punish these 'bad girls' while letting off free the men who were paying for their 'services' or profiting obscenely from their involvement in prostitution. It is only a hundred years or so ago, for example, that the prevailing belief was that 'girls and women could "fall" but boys could not' (Jackson 2000, cited in Brown and Barrett 2002). At this time, the enduring feature of debates about child prostitution was the balance between care and control (Brown and Barrett, 2002).

Awareness of the issue of young people exploited through prostitution has been raised in recent years primarily as a result of work undertaken by major children's charities (see Lee and O'Brien 1995; Barrett 1997; Barnardo's 1998; Melrose *et al.* 1999). An increased awareness of the issue amongst a variety of statutory agencies, voluntary sector organizations and professional groups has resulted in the introduction of government guidance in relation to the treatment of, and response to, young people who are abused through prostitution (DoH/HO/DFEE 2000). This represents a major advance insofar as there is now at least official recognition, after many years of official denial, that such a problem exists in Britain (Brown and Barrett 2002). Having taken the enormous step of recognising the existence of this problem in contemporary Britain, the government now needs to make adequate resources available to a variety of agencies so that it can be tackled efficiently and appropriately.

The guidance effectively marks a paradigm shift in relation to the treatment of these young people (from control and punishment to care and welfare) and is therefore very much to be welcomed. However, it is important to recognize that the guidance, under certain conditions, does allow for these young people to be processed through the juvenile justice system in the way that other young offenders are (DoH/HO/DFEE 2000). These conditions are when young people are considered by those involved in their care to be 'persistently and voluntarily returning to prostitution' (DoH/HO/DFEE 2000). As Phoenix (2002) has recently pointed out, this caveat in the guidance suggests that those who 'persist' in prostitution experience something other than child abuse. In addition, the meaning of 'persistence' is open to local interpretation and may possibly result in conflict between practitioners from different agencies and/or national variability in the way that the behaviour of these young people is interpreted and responded to. Where and when such conflicts might arise, it will be necessary, forcefully, to demonstrate that those who 'persistently' return to prostitution are those who are most vulnerable and most in need of care and protection. The 'persistence' of such young people will require redoubled persistence on the part of practitioners if they are effectively to engage and work with them. Regardless of how frustrating this work may be at times, for those who are concerned with the welfare of children it will be important to bear in mind that punishment and criminalization are not adequate alternatives

to care and protection (Melrose and Barrett 1999; Melrose and Ayre 2002; Barrett and Melrose 2003).

Although the new guidance is therefore to be welcomed, it is important not to overlook the contradictions within it. These contradictions are, arguably, further reinforced in the new Sexual Offences Act 2003. This Act creates a new offence of 'Commercial sexual exploitation of a child which will protect children up to 18' (Cm 5668, 30). A range of activities are covered by the Act, including:

Buying the sexual services of a child, for which the penalty will be life when the child is under 13, 14 years in prison when the child is aged 13-15; and 7 years imprisonment when the child is aged 16-17.

Causing or encouraging a child into commercial sexual exploitation; facilitating the commercial sexual exploitation of a child; and controlling the activities of a child in prostitution or pornography, the maximum penalty for all of which will be 14 years imprisonment. (Cm 5668, 30)

Although these provisions may make it easier to secure prosecutions against those who pay to sexually abuse children and/or against those who sexually exploit children for commercial gain, they do not revoke the notion of 'persistence' contained in the earlier guidance (DoH/HO/DFEE 2000). We are therefore left with a situation where the new Sexual Offences Act places the onus of responsibility for the commercial sexual exploitation of children squarely (and correctly) with the adults who abuse and exploit them, while the earlier guidance places the onus of responsibility on the children when they are considered to be 'persisting' in prostitution.

Some Observations on Terminology

As a result of the shift occasioned by the introduction of government guidance, there has been a concomitant shift in the language we employ to define and talk about young people involved in commercial sexual exploitation (Melrose 2002). Previously, euphemisms such as 'young sex worker' were employed by those working in the field who were concerned to minimize the stigma that attaches to those, young and old, involved in prostitution. Although these terms were kindly meant, Pitts (1997) has pointed out that, in fact, they served merely to conceal 'the enormity of the violation to which these young people were subject'. It is now widely accepted that young people's involvement in prostitution does not result from a 'free economic or moral choice' (DoH/HO/DFEE 2000). It has therefore become more common to refer to them as 'young people involved in commercial sexual exploitation' (Pearce *et al.* 2000a, 2000b) and/or as 'young people abused through prostitution' (see Barnardo's 1998).

Talking of children and young people involved in prostitution has become something of a semantic minefield. While the politics of language may appear to be a rather esoteric discussion to have in the context of a paper that is intended

for practitioners, language and our interpretations of social reality are not disconnected. The terminology we employ is a vital component of how the issue is constructed, understood and responded to in practice.

The issue of how we define young people's involvement in commercial sexual exploitation is extremely important because, depending on how we define the problem, we will produce different estimates of its scale (Lee 1993) and develop different responses in practice. The time has come to begin to distinguish between what might be termed 'broad' and 'narrow' definitions. By this, I mean that it is necessary to recognize that in the past 20 years or so, the sex industry has greatly expanded and diversified (see for example, Scambler and Scambler 1997; Weitzer 2000). As a result of new technology (the Internet, mobile phones, commercial tourism and so on) there has been a proliferation of telephone sex lines, an increase in the availability of pornography and a growth in prostitution in both on and off-street locations. In short, there has been a sharp increase in the potential for young people to become involved in commercial sexual exploitation and a multiplication of the sites through which, or at which, they may be so involved (Melrose and Brown 2002). Young people may be involved in commercial sexual exploitation in a variety of locations (on or off-street, for example) and under various terms and conditions (O'Connell-Davidson 1998). I would argue, therefore, in line with the present government, that there is a need to employ a 'broad' definition of commercial sexual exploitation and to recognize that the term 'commercial sexual exploitation' can include:

[T]he prostitution of children and young people; the production, sale, marketing and possession of pornographic material involving children; the distribution of pornographic pictures of children over the Internet; trafficking in children; and sex tourism involving children. (DH/HO 2001)

Many practitioners are also beginning to recognize that when young people are involved in commercial sexual exploitation, this renders them vulnerable to being preyed on in other ways - for example, through drug misuse - and involvement in damaging social networks. It also exposes them to other forms of exploitation within the contemporary sex industry (NSPCC 2003). In addition, we have become aware that those men who are involved in the commercial sexual abuse of children, whether by paying for their 'services' or by forcing them into prostitution, are frequently involved in other serious crimes such as drug-dealing and/or possession of firearms (Duffin 2004). They are often ruthless and very dangerous men.

Because the language has become highly significant but loaded, cumbersome and perhaps not expressive enough of the material conditions these young people encounter, some practitioners have attempted to refine definitions of young people involved in 'commercial sexual exploitation'. They have attempted to distinguish between those believed to be 'at risk' of involvement and those already involved (Pearce *et al.* 2003, Lucas *et al.* 2004). The former are said to be involved in 'sexual exploitation' (for example in relationships with older men)

while the latter are involved in ‘*commercial* sexual exploitation’ (prostitution). Many now argue that as girls under 16 cannot legally consent to sex, they cannot be associated actively with activities related to prostitution and therefore should not be referred to as ‘prostitutes’ (Patel and Pearce 2004).

The Context of Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Young People

The issue of children abused through prostitution cannot be understood outside of the social conditions that give rise to this phenomenon (O’Neill 1997). These conditions are historical, political and economic. The profound social, economic and political changes that have occurred in Britain in the past 20-25 years, labour market reorganization and welfare retrenchment, for example, have inadvertently created the conditions in which the commercial sexual exploitation of children and young people has flourished (Melrose *et al.* 1999; Melrose 2000b; Melrose and Barrett 2001; Melrose and Ayre 2002; Pearce *et al.* 2003). It has recently been argued, for example, that modern Europe is distinguished precisely by the unencumbered transit of commodities and girls (Duval 1996 cited in Fekete and Webber 1997).

The sex industry has grown exponentially in Britain and the rest of the world in this period (Weitzer 2000). We have witnessed what might be described as the sexualization of global relations and the globalisation of sexual relations (see, for example, Weeks 2002). Encapsulated within this ‘growth industry’ is a burgeoning market in children (Brown 2000; Melrose and Brown 2002; Lehti 2003). In some cases, this market may be expanding because ‘men like fresh meat’ (see Melrose *et al.* 1999). In other instances, it may be because young people are assumed to be free of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and/or that they can act as ‘living condoms’ (Donovan 1991). It has even been suggested that in some countries a belief abounds that having sex with a pre-pubescent girl is a ‘cure’ for AIDS (Brown 2000).

The Scale of the Problem

Although locally, nationally (and internationally) the scale of this problem remains unknown (McNeish 1998), we now know more than we previously did about young people who are involved in commercial sexual exploitation in Britain. We know, for example, that the extent of the problem is much more widespread than may previously have been imagined (see also Brain *et al.* 1998; Melrose *et al.* 1999; Melrose with Barrett 2004). We also know that this problem exists in many towns and cities across the UK and is not just confined to major metropolitan or urban areas (see Brain *et al.* 1998; Melrose *et al.* 1999). In addition, we know that young men as well as young women are involved (Barrett 1997). Informed estimates suggest that as many as 5000 young people in Britain may be involved at any one time (Barrett 1998).

Despite the developments in our knowledge and understanding of this issue, it is sadly necessary to note that prevailing socio-economic conditions are ripe for increasing numbers of young people to become involved in commercial sexual exploitation and for the trade to flourish. In these new conditions, bodies have become increasingly commodified and the bodies of young people are lucrative commodities in the global market place (Melrose and Brown 2002). 'Profits from the traffic in human beings amount to \$7 billion annually' (UN 1998b, cited in Kelly and Regan 2000) and it is estimated that 500,000 women were trafficked into the European Union in 1995 (IOM 1996, cited in Kelly and Regan 2000, 16). The increase in global traffic in human beings promises only to increase the problems associated with young people who are sexually exploited through prostitution in the UK (Melrose and Brown 2002).

Becoming Involved in Prostitution

All those working with young people who are abused through prostitution bear witness to the fact that young people become involved in commercial sexual exploitation for a range of complex and interconnected - even overlapping - reasons and that it is seldom possible to pinpoint a single 'cause'. Rather, there is a complex interaction between a range of 'push' and 'pull' factors and between individual and environmental factors. Evidence also demonstrates that drugs are an increasingly important factor in young people being abused through prostitution (Melrose *et al.* 1999; Crosby and Barrett 1999; Melrose with Barrett 2004). This may be because the young person has developed a drug habit - especially in relation to the use of heroin and/or crack cocaine - and then becomes involved in commercial sexual activity in order to fund their drug use. Alternatively, it may be that abusive adults provide them with drugs with the intention of luring them into sex work or trapping them in it once they have become involved (Lehti 2003). However their drug problems start or develop, it is clear that drug use is a major complicating factor in trying to work with these young people and it is necessary to make provisions for responding to this level of need when planning service responses (Melrose 2000a).

How young people become involved in commercial sexual exploitation remains a matter of some controversy. The debate and evidence are complex but can be simplistically characterized as those adhering to a 'pimping and grooming' model on the one side (Barnardo's 1998) or those acknowledging the agency of young people on the other (Melrose *et al.* 1999). The former position tends to argue that young people involved in prostitution are the victims of abusive adults who have coerced them into prostitution. This model of 'pimping and grooming' derives predominantly from a discourse of childhood, which originates in the nineteenth century, and through which young people (particularly young women) are defined as innocent, asexual, vulnerable and/or helpless. This discourse is particularly associated with the work of the National Vigilance Society of the 1890s (Brown and Barrett 2002; Brown 2004).

The latter model, on the other hand, recognizes that young people can and do make decisions for themselves and that sometimes these decisions involve them in becoming involved in prostitution. It is acknowledged, however, that such a decision usually results from severely constrained options or highly structured choices (Pitts 1997; Pettitway 1997, Melrose *et al.* 1999; Wilkinson-Shaw 2004). This latter position tends to draw on evidence that suggests peer group influences and clusters are an important part of understanding young people's entry into, and sustained involvement in, prostitution. This debate is not helped by the fact that there exists very little empirical evidence to support conclusively one side or the other and what evidence does exist is drawn primarily from small-scale, local agency studies (but see Melrose *et al.* 1999 for an exception). It is of course possible that there are regional variations in the organization and operation of child sex markets and what might be true of one area will not necessarily be true of another.

Politically, this debate is *necessarily* extremely sensitive. Historically, young people involved in prostitution have been represented either as 'culpable villains' (worthy of punishment and control) or as 'abused and helpless victims' (worthy of 'rescue' and care). If we agree that these young people should be treated as victims of abuse (as I do), then there are certain vested interests in showing that they are involved in prostitution as a result of being coerced by an abusive adult rather than as a result of their own agency. By arguing that others coerce young people into prostitution, rather than young people deciding themselves to adopt prostitution activities, it can be demonstrated more easily that they 'deserve' our care, attention and even sympathy. However, while this model of involvement in prostitution is important in identifying that becoming involved in prostitution is a social *process*, it appears not to acknowledge that this process occurs within particular historical, economic, political, ideological, social and even technological conditions. It is therefore equally important to acknowledge that this model does not necessarily tell the whole story and that it is limited because it tends to deny the agency of the young people themselves (see Melrose *et al.* 1999).

Acknowledging that there are some young people involved in prostitution who have *not* been forced into it by an abusive adult may seem like political suicide to those who have campaigned long and hard to have these children and young people accepted as in need of care and protection rather than punishment. However, this need not necessarily be so. This acknowledgement demands that we consider the circumstances in which the decision to prostitute appears as a viable option. It forces us to recognize that for many of these young people 'the relationships and networks that ordinarily might have prevented their drift into self-destructive or self-defeating behaviour are absent' (Pitts 1997, 149). This recognition compels us to acknowledge that prostitution only appears as a viable option for those young people whose past experiences and present circumstances are so negative and reduced that they feel there is no alternative (Pitts 1997). It is precisely these young people who are most in need of care and protection (Melrose and Barrett 1999).

As we have seen, sex markets are dynamic and constantly changing. What may explain a young person's involvement in one time and place will not necessarily explain the involvement of a different young person in another time and place. As these markets develop, expand, and become more sophisticated, so too must our understandings of them if we are to provide appropriate interventions. Questions about *how* and *why* young people become involved in commercial sexual exploitation are important for practice because it is evident that different reasons for becoming involved require different responses to help exit (see Melrose 2000a). If a young person is involved because an abusive adult has coerced him or her, then it is obviously crucial that every attempt is made to disrupt that abusive relationship. If, on the other hand, a young person is involved because he or she regards prostitution as a viable source of income, then alternative interventions and responses need to be sought. In short, the reason for the young person's involvement must be determined in order to develop an effective response.

What Do Young People Abused Through Prostitution Need?

All the available evidence testifies that young people involved in commercial sexual exploitation are usually desperately vulnerable and socially isolated in the sense that they are often lacking appropriate support systems and positive help networks. It demonstrates that these young people are often struggling with issues of self-esteem and self-worth and need support and encouragement in order to be able to value themselves. In order to receive this support, the young people require a comprehensive range of 'joined up' services to meet a range of complex needs (Melrose 2003; Melrose with Barrett 2004). To attract the resources required to provide these services, the issue of commercial sexual exploitation of young people needs to be 'mainstreamed' through other services. This might be achieved, for example, by incorporating these issues into the educational curriculum, through youth service provision (Connexions), through incorporating the issue into local Crime and Disorder Strategies and/or by mainstreaming through Primary Care Trusts and other bodies.

The evidence also shows that young people involved in commercial sexual exploitation can sometimes be 'hard to reach' and difficult to engage. They have been described as young people who 'tend to be scruffy and have attitude problems' (Wellard 1999, 19). This may be the case especially when the young person is in a 'relationship' with an abusive adult ('pimp') and/or when they have established substance misuse problems. Additionally, they are likely to be suspicious of 'helping' agencies and 'authority figures' because they often perceive that they have been, at best, let down by adults and, at worst, abused by them in the past. In this respect, the importance of persisting in trying to engage the young person cannot be overstated. Practitioners need to be patient and to offer a non-judgemental and non-discriminatory ear and hand, and for the child to know that they are 'there for them' (Melrose 2003; Melrose with Barrett

2004). In this way, trust between the child and the practitioner may be established, and over time this may provide an opportunity to undertake work with them that may eventually enable them to leave prostitution. Practitioners need to know that this is likely to be a long haul. There is a need to accept that there are no magic wands to wave or immediate solutions in this field of practice.

Practice Responses to Young People Abused through Prostitution

As a result of empirically based research (for example, Barnardos 1998; Melrose *et al.* 1999; Phoenix 2001) we are beginning to understand more about the aetiology of the problem, the reasons for young people becoming involved and the sorts of things that serve to ensnare them once they are involved (Melrose *et al.* 1999). Consequently we are also more aware of what needs to be done in practice in order to respond effectively to these young people and at the same time we are more aware of what should *not* be done (Melrose 2003; Melrose with Barrett 2004).

The issue of young people who are exploited through prostitution is multifaceted and profoundly complex. It is therefore beyond the scope of a single agency to respond effectively. This suggests the importance of developing multi-agency and interdisciplinary approaches. Achieving such a 'joined-up' response in practice, however, may be rather more difficult than it sounds and, in order to do so, a number of complexities and challenges need to be overcome if the young people, and the practitioners concerned, are to reap the rewards of partnership work. Such evidence as is available suggests the importance of having agreed protocols and procedures in place to confront the issue and to ensure that these young people are protected from further abuse (Melrose with Barrett 2004). Partnerships also need to acknowledge the importance of keeping the welfare of the young people in sight at all times and in everything that is done to respond to them.

First, and foremost, agencies working together need to build relationships of trust if they are to work effectively in partnership (Crawford 1997, cited in Crawford 1998). This may take some time when agencies with different value bases and goals seek to establish a common ground. Once established, it is essential to acknowledge the 'fragility' of trust relationships and therefore their need for 'on-going nurturing and monitoring' (Crawford 1998). Balancing the need to ensure a confidential service for the young people on the one hand with the need to share information about them with other practitioners on the other, for instance, is a matter of delicate negotiation in partnership arrangements and is an issue around which conflicts and tensions may arise. Additionally, or alternatively, conflicts may arise between 'harm minimization' and 'child protection' approaches to the work.

There are, of course, different models of partnership working that represent 'ideal types'. On the one hand, there is a model of '*inter-agency*' working while on the other, a model of '*multi-agency*' working (Crawford and Jones 1996, cited in

Crawford 1998, 174). In the former there is some degree of loss of organizational autonomy for the agencies involved because this type of partnership arrangement requires some amount of ‘fusion and melding’ between the agencies involved (Crawford 1998, 175). On the other hand, in multiagency working, agencies come together without it affecting significantly the work they do within their own organizations. ‘The same tasks are conducted in co-operation with others but the role of various partners remains distinct’ (Crawford 1998, 174). When key representatives of agencies or institutions come together in multi-agency work, ‘core tasks remain unaltered as multi-agency work is grafted on to existing practices or those existing practices are redefined’ (Crawford 1998, 175).

Both these models of partnership working allow for a holistic approach to the issue of children abused through prostitution that is ‘problem focused rather than bureaucratically driven’ (Crawford 1998). At the same time, they provide new possibilities for generating creative responses to meet the needs of these exceptionally vulnerable young people.

Conclusions

This article has shown that the issue of young people abused through prostitution is now firmly on the political agenda and that as a consequence, a shift in orientation, in terms of the treatment of these young people, has occurred. It has cautioned, however, that the concept of ‘persistence’ in government guidance may lead to less of a shift in practice than we might ideally like. The discussion has suggested, however, that there are still elements of this phenomenon that we do not yet understand clearly enough (for example, the scale of the problem and the mechanisms of entry). On the other hand, we are more aware of what constitute effective interventions and this discussion has argued that the way forward is through holistic, flexible but intensive interventions delivered through multi-agency partnerships. The discussion has also suggested that in order to attract the resources that this area of work desperately needs, there is a need to mainstream service provision for this particularly vulnerable group of young people.

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