

'Life of Uncertainty': Encounter of Childhood in the Brothel

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Abstract: The children living in brothels are susceptible to a range of risks. Some risks are from the physical location of the brothels; some are constructed/caused by children themselves, their mothers and the brothels, and; some are risks constructed/caused by the outside community, broader society, outside institutions like police, political leaders, and the government. In this situation, childhood in the brothel is not adorable rather it is more despicable for the brothel children. They have to face multiple heinous circumstances like accommodation hazard, drug addiction and business, psychological depression, child marriage or weapon of local politics in their juvenescence period which is socially constructed. This process make them untouchable for the mainstream society as well as hindering for their own future life.

Keywords: Childhood, Brothel, Children, Encounter, Life experiences

1. Introduction

The children living in brothel are ostracized from the mainstream society, religion, kinship, local government etc. For survival, the brothel community creates its own society, which is quite different than that of the mainstream one. This is a different world, when anyone enters this world has to forget of outer world as well as has to forget about the past, laws of these area is far more difference from mainstream society. So, living within this society, a child in brothel inherits an “untouchable stamp” on his/her identity, which works very cruelly against him or her when s/he tries to interact with the mainstream society. In this condition, this article will sharply argue that childhood is constructed by the particular socio-cultural ambience as well as it is encompassed by 'uncertainty'. Essentially, due to idiocy or inaction uncertainty arises in partially observable or nonsmooth environments. There is a relation between uncertainty and childhood; when anyone faced with environmental uncertainty, people often respond in different ways depending on their childhood environment (Griskevicius et al., 2013) .

On the contrary, counting this situation it can be interpreted that particular culture has an influential effect on childhood. Though American psychologist G. Stanley Hall (1904) argued that because of biological changes at puberty adolescence people were in the grip of powerful biological changes which they could not control. But an American prominent cultural anthropologist Mead (1928) rejected the idea by claiming that behaviour in adolescence was caused by cultural conditioning rather than biological changes. It also observed that Boas (1912), the father of American Anthropology, stated that the child's

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"mental makeup" must also be affected by "the social and geographical environment". So this article will argue that childhood from brothel children is full of uncertainty as well as unrecognized. In this ground this article will illustrate life experiences of brothel children with different socio-cultural data.

For continuing further discussion, this article will divide into three sections except introduction and conclusion. In the very next section, this article will elaborate the field area and data collection methodology of the research, after that contextualize the paper with relevant literature review, then this article will admit the childhood encounter of the brothel child through different stakeholder's voice.

2. Field and research methodology: A brief evocation

This research conducted in a brothel named Daulatdia brothel which is situated nearby the river port and the rail station at Daulatdia union of Goalanda Upazila of Rajbari district. It is about 86 kilometers far from Dhaka. This area was developed since the British colonial period. That time it was sparkling river port as well as a business hub (Shohel, 2013). This is the largest brothel in Bangladesh. It has its own socio-economic environment, with tailors, beauty shops, cigarette shops, phone shops and food stores and so on. Almost 1,800 sex workers (About 1,400 registered and about 400 non-registered) and 900 children live in this brothel (Asadul & Russell, 2016). In this research the qualitative research methods used for data collection. To understand the situation and issues that children at brothels experience from a holistic perspective, three FGDs have been conducted and FGDs had been conducted with children and adults (both male and female) as well as to receive opinions on situation from an individual perspective, 10 KIIs have been conducted with both male and female children of that particular area.

3. Literature review

As a discipline anthropology has a great attention on conceptualization of 'childhood' and with this continuation in 1970s the anthropology of childhood has emerged as a idiosyncratic field of knowledge in UK. But previously, American anthropologist Margaret Mead pointed children's socialization and cultural imparting process in her theoretical work named culture and personality studies during the 1940s and 50s (Montgomery, 2009). In 'Cognitive Development Theory' Vygotsky's showed that child cognitive development is constructed by society and culture and this development process culture plays a negotiator role (Vygotsky, 1978). That is why different scholars imposed that the experiences of children as well as childhood are determined by certain social and cultural norms, values, history and political economy (Levine, 2008). To understand the childhood, it is important to address the social construction not biological phenomenon (Archard, 1993); have to distinguish between a child and an adult period (Aries, 1982); have to 'break with tradition' regarding childhood notion (James, 2009). In the context of Bangladesh it is difficult to conceptualize the concept of children as well as childhood according to age rather it is understandable as cultural categories of childhood such as *sisukal* (infancy), *balaykal* (childhood), *kaisor* (adolescent), *madhaykal* (middle age), *bridhokal* (old age) and so on (Aziz and Maloney, 1985). Additionally, this is also observed various dimensions of childhood according to gender, age, class, religion and so on in Bangladesh (Blanchet, 1996).

Child rearing is a challenging responsibility for a mother who live in a brothel. Being a single parent, mother has to go through social stigma as well as maintain odd working hours because of her professional nature (Pardeshi & Bhattacharya, 2006). The children from brothel also face social and cultural difficulties because of mother's profession as well as society treat as a social burden (Sircar & Dutta, 2011). In Bangladesh, the children of sex workers are culturally and socially excluded from orthodox society because of their social identity, cultural background and their living environment (Shohel & Howes, 2008). Lack of supportive environment and mother's professional status, at an early stage of life the children of sex workers have to face social negligence and this consequences push them into different socio-cultural insecurities (Shohel, 2013). On the other hand, for the brothel it is a common scenario that children hide under the bed whilst their mothers engage in sex with their customers on the bed as well as girl child become exposed to early sexual activities and have to shear their mother's clients. To do so, girls are given extra food (and sometimes harmful drugs) to make them healthy and attractive by their mother (Khan & Azad, 2013). In the brothel, both boys and girls are experienced to physical abuse, gambling, drugs, and the underworld and their socialization process merged with drugs, alcohol and sex (Habib, Amanullah, Daniel & Lovejoy, 2001; Amanullah & Huda, 2012).

Context of Bangladesh, a lot of scholars work in different brothels to understand the socio-economic condition, health situation, trafficking, education of sex workers as well as their children. Hossain & el (2010) addressed sexual lifestyle and socioeconomic condition of sex workers who live in Dauladia brothel, Rajbari in their paper. They found that most of the sex workers have no knowledge of literacy, monthly income various from six to twenty five thousands, most of them are young and unmarried but among them almost 50% had child. They engaged with this profession because of financial insolvency, willingly or born in the brothel and they have little knowledge about sexually transmitted disease. Khan (2010) described that trafficking is the main factor for engaging one in sex trade in Bangladesh though other influencing factors like education, poverty or unemployment, marital status, geographical area can be counted. Sultana (2015) argued that from feminist pro-sex-work perspectives both sex worker activism and HIV-prevention initiatives find some results and this initiatives emphasized to give importance on individual and collective agency. In her article she showed a relationship between HIV-related discourse and sex worker activism in Bangladesh. Haq & Chowdhury (2012) described the safe sex practices among the brothel sex workers. They showed that overall condition of condom use in brothel satisfactory but bonded (those who are under the control of a Sordarni) sex workers can't maintain this practice for all the customers because of *Sordarni*.

4. Children life in the brothel: Childhood encounter through life experiences

4.1 Accommodation used as business hub

In the brothel, dwellers rent a room for their living and they share this place with all of their household members. They also use this place as their business hub (take their client in the same room) because the room rent is very high (the rent varies from 6000-7000 per month). One of the respondent said, that *when mothers take their customers in their room then children stay outside and move hither and thither because they have no place/room*

to stay. The foremost victims of this uncomfortable situation are children. It is observed mothers taking clients either leaving their infants unattended or keeping them in the same room with them. Relatively older children (6/7 years old), especially boys spend their time outside the house and they fraternize with different types of people. Many get involved in criminal activities at the early stage of their life and also mothers lose the control over them. This kind of problem is a common scenario in the brothel.

4.2 Drug addiction and business

Drug addiction is a common problem in the brothel. Most of the 10-12 years old children are addicted to drugs. One respondent said, *drugs and alcohol are easily available in brothels. 6-18 years old children are involved in drug transportation and selling. From their early age they are used to see smoking biri, cigarette, ganja, heroine and wine by customers as very common. They often bring these products for customers. Customers make children happy by giving some money. Further, customers give children drugs to take. Both male and female children become addicted to drugs. Female children who are forced to take customer as child prostitutes are the worst victims of drugs as well.* Most of the cases main reason of addiction is acute depression among sex workers and their children. Also, children are regarded as the safe careers of drugs as police do not usually suspect a child. This also provides the children with a handsome income. On the other hand, a sex worker wants her male child start earning money as soon as possible to increase the household income. However, it also observed that most of the children of the landladies and leaders do not face this problem as the mothers can afford to keep them outside of the community by renting a place outside or keeping the children with extended family.

4.3 Psychological problem

The environment of the brothel is not in favor for children's psychological development. Their mental health is fragile because in their childhood they observed that their mothers take different people in different times as sex partners. Sometimes, they have to buy *condom* for their mothers' clients and also sometimes they watch their mothers having sex. These types of exposure cause profound risk for male children. This mental stress in turn compels the male children of the brothel to take drugs and engage in crimes.

The female children living in the brothels become the worst victim of different psychological tortures. First, they experience abusive languages inside the brothels, mostly because of the profession of their mother. One respondent from female children regretted that *have we committed a sin by being born? Why do we always hear, 'you the daughter of a whore'?* Second, after a certain age, the male children can form a friend circle and go outside the brothels but the female children cannot. If they somehow manage to go outside the brothels again they hear that they are daughters of whores. Thirdly and most importantly female children always live in intense fear of getting involved in sex trade. Therefore, the female children living in the brothels are more psychologically fragile compared to the male children living in the brothels.

4.4 Children used as commodity

In brothels, often a sex worker sells her child to earn money. In cases of pregnancy of bonded sex workers, their *shardarnis* (the brothel managers who rent house and employ

sex workers) also force them (mothers) to sell their children. On the other hand, brothel is a place where selling of children, especially young girls is a common phenomenon. One of the sex worker said that *I had a dream to be a mother. My dream came true when I gave birth to a healthy child. But as I was a bonded sex worker, I had to sell the child as instructed by my owner to a broker. I did not even get a share of the sale proceed as it was divided between my owner and another influential pimp. So, my dream came true to be a mother, but the brothel turned me into a childless mother. Selling of children is a booming business in the brothel.*

In this process, male children are the most vulnerable victims. When a mother conceives then it is difficult for her to take clients as before so she falls in economic crisis. At this stage, they are forced to sell the unborn infant to survive through the months of pregnancy and post childbirth period. In our research we found that most *Chukris* (a young sex worker) and poor sex workers sell their children while the well off and free ones can keep theirs.

4.5 Victim of child marriage

Though child marriage is a common problem in our entire society but it is marked a new dimension of child marriage in brothels. Here child marriage is used as a technique to legitimize sex trade and the victims of this technique are female children. The mother of a female child would arrange a “*marriage*” of her daughter often conspiring with the “to-be son-in-law”. She would send her daughter to her in-laws’ house. But she would become victim of physical and mental violence by her husband, in-laws and other community members due to her identity as a sex worker’s daughter. Very soon, it would become too difficult for her to survive in the mainstream society. Then the mother would bring her back to the brothel and advise her to start working as a sex worker. At this stage, the daughter has no way so she involves in her mother’s occupation. This process actually keep both the mother and daughter content as they can motivate themselves that have tried to live a normal life, but the society did not allow them to do so. Almost similar experienced 17 years girl said that *I am a daughter of a sex worker. My mother married me off two years ago. My husband is a garments worker in Dhaka. I use to live with my mother. My husband used to send 2000 Taka per month to meet my costs. But he stopped sending money after a few months. So that time I had no option so I registered my name in the prostitute book and after some period I came to that basically my marriage ceremony was a puppet show as well as my husband was a puppet and my mother was the show director. Now this is a common phenomena in our brothel.* Additionally after retirement most sex workers try to expose their daughters to the clients. Often mothers influence their clients to abuse their daughters. The older sex workers expect that their daughters will support them in future by registering their name as sex workers.

4.6 Weapon of local politics

Children of brothel especially the male children are used as a weapon of power politics. The political leaders of that particular area use the children living in brothels for their own business; one respondent said that *political leaders provide patronage and shelters to the children for their own interest.* The children living in brothels are easy prey to fall in traps of political leaders as they are already vulnerable due to the endogenous risks that

they endure in brothels (as discussed above). One respondent said that *female children in brothel are treated as assets and are taken care of, on the other hand male children are left to fend for themselves. Taking advantage of this situation, the political leaders, local influential people and drug businessmen use them for their need.* They (children) do not receive proper guidance, proper economic means and proper family attention. So, at the age of 12-15 they become their own guardian and the politicians take this opportunity to lure them to work for them in exchange of money and power.

4.7 Child labor

In the mainstream society parents try their best to keep their child away from income generating activities in their tender age. But in the brothel context the mothers of the children especially want their children earn money. So they welcome child labor. On the other hand, when a mother cannot provide basic needs to the children then the children try to meet those needs on their own and for this they engage in odd job and become child laborers. In these circumstances, mainly the male children are the main victims of child labor while the girls start working as a sex worker. One respondent said that *....children (boy) of brothel are involved in risky work such as- work as a shepherd in the cattle market, feeding cows oil cake, chaff and straw. They also guard the cows at night and doing such a work children often get injured by the cow's punch of horn and kick of feet. The children also work as a helper of dockyard and boat worker. They work for transporting and selling drugs.* They also work in port, dockyard, local restaurants etc. Mainly, the children of *Chukris* and poor sex workers are involved in such kinds of activities.

5. Conclusion

Socialization of a child is a linear process. In this process every step is very important. Any disorder of this process ruins a child's proper development. But in the context of children living in brothel, different types of inner and outer social factors interrupt this process. Destruction starts from a mother's womb. They live on the sinful occupation of their mothers, their biological fathers often refuse to recognize them as their children let alone take the responsibilities of raising them. They have to face unpleasant situations to get national identity card because it is essential to mention the name of their father to get a national identity card. In brothels, children live in an extremely vulnerable situation which turns their childhood as a social curse that cannot be easily changed.

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