

## The Prevalence of Running Away from Home among Prostituted Children in Malaysia

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**Abstract: Problem statement:** One of the significant groups of young women in prostitution is the runaways, children under 18 years of age who leave home without the permission of their parents or legal guardians. In this case, runaways also include 'throwaways', young people who are forced to leave home or who are not actively sought after when they do leave home. Even though both groups of children are terminologically different, they are in similar situation. Both are not living with their parents or legal guardians. **Approach:** This research used children-centered approach considering the sensitivity of the nature of child prostitution and the fact that it is a small scale research. A total of 63 sexually exploited young women who were residents in two rehabilitation centers participated in this research. Both centers were located in Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia). In this research, both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. **Results:** The incidence of running away from home among the young women interviewed was excessive. Of the 63 respondents, 84.1% admitted running away from home at least once. The majority of these young women ran away from home because they felt depressed with their family situations, were influenced by friends or boyfriends, or they were having problems with their mothers/stepmothers. When asked about problems at home, 81% confessed that they had problems at home. There were four major problems frequently cited by the young women: Parental lack of love and attention (emotional neglect), family members always fighting, parental lack of responsibility or physical neglect and parental substance abuse and/or gambling. All the young women agreed that the problems faced at home had had significant impacts on their life. **Conclusion:** Neglect, abuse and violence at home appeared to be contributing factors towards children running away from home thus leading them into prostitution.

**Key words:** Runaway, child prostitution, child abuse, emotional abuse, physical abuse, Malaysia

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### INTRODUCTION

It is estimated that several hundred thousand to over two million children run away from or are thrown out of their homes each year, at least half of them turn to prostitution in order to survive<sup>[7]</sup>. Several studies have found that up to 77-90% of young women in prostitution ran away from home, at least once before they turn to prostitution. However, many have extensive runaway histories<sup>[13]</sup>.

In Thailand, the United Nations<sup>[30]</sup> reports that the prevalence of running away from home among prostituted young people is much higher, that is 92%. Other sources find that two out of three young women in prostitution are runaways; 84% of them report current or past homelessness<sup>[6,31]</sup>. Raphael and Shapiro<sup>[24]</sup> discovers that almost 56% of respondents who are involved in prostitution ran away from home at least once, one-third ran away between 2-4 times, 21% ran away between 5-10 times and 30% ran away for

more than 10 times; the mean age of first time runaways is 13.4 years. They also report that about 28% of the respondents were told to leave home by their parents or guardians, of which 40% were told to leave home between 2-4 times, 16% between 5-10 times and 32% for more than 10 times. The mean age of respondents forced to leave home for the first time is 15.1 years. In Moscow, IPEC<sup>[14]</sup> reports that runaways children are more inclined to be involved in prostitution (77.9%) as compared to other criminal activities (56.9%).

**The causes of children running away from home:** According to Flowers<sup>[7]</sup>, there are two major motivations that lead children to run away from home and opt for the streets. The first is to avoid an emotional experience or consequence that they expect to occur. The second is to escape a recurrent or ongoing unpleasant, painful, or difficult experience in their life. Schaffner<sup>[27]</sup> indicates that young people choose to run

away from home as a last resort in order to escape from abuse and not as a result of 'impulsive decision' by an 'incorrigible delinquent'. Many sources document that majority of these young people ran away from dysfunctional homes or homes with physically, emotionally and sexually abusive environments, such as parental harassment, violence, parental drugs and alcohol abuse, neglect and other family problems<sup>[8-10,26]</sup>. Several researchers have found that 44-77 % of young women on the streets ran away from home in order to flee from violence at home and/or in their community, including physical abuse, gun violence, gang violence and physical assaults on the way to and while in school<sup>[22]</sup>.

According to Yates *et al.*<sup>[34]</sup>, young women who ran away from home and engaged in prostitution in most cases have histories of childhood abuse, particularly sexual abuse. Many studies find that 35-73% of runaway children experienced sexual abuse whether by family members or outsiders before leaving home<sup>[27,29]</sup>. Saphira<sup>[26]</sup> reports that more than half of the runaways were victims of sexual or physical abuse at home, 25% of them were raped and almost all came from dysfunctional families. Whitbeck and Hoyt<sup>[32]</sup> find the percentage of children running away from home because of neglect and domestic abuse/violence is even higher. They report that 59% of respondents ran away from home because they were neglected, 28% were abandoned by parents for 24 h, 81% were pushed or grabbed in anger, 64% were threatened with a gun or knife, 18% were asked by a caregiver to perform a sexual activity and 21% were forced to engage in a sexual activity. Kamala *et al.*<sup>[17]</sup> also indicate that of 250 children interviewed, 80% left home when they were 12-16 years old. The reasons for leaving home are, above all, conflicts with their fathers (18%), violence and maltreatment by relatives or guardians (20%) and sexual abuse by relatives and members of the family (3%).

Many scholars agree that violence and abuse at home is the biggest contributing factor as to why children run away from home<sup>[7,31,34]</sup>. Therefore, it has been argued that it is not sexual abuse, rather running away from home that leads children into prostitution<sup>[5]</sup>. Barrett<sup>[2]</sup> suggests that running away is a more salient factor for becoming involved in prostitution than childhood sexual abuse. Dean and Thomson<sup>[4]</sup> indicate most prostituted young people were initially runaways.

**The effects of running away from home:** The social control theory explains the existence of the link between running away and prostitution involvement of children<sup>[3]</sup>. The theory suggests that failures in the

social bond, which arise from childhood sexual abuse, will make young people vulnerable to run away from home or families in order to join friends on the streets, who later introduce them to delinquent activities such as prostitution. Widom<sup>[33]</sup> proves that childhood sexual abuse victims are more likely to runaway from home into the streets before ending up in prostitution. In addition, McClanahan *et al.*<sup>[18]</sup> report that childhood sexual abuse victims who have run away from home are significantly more likely than non-runaways to have ever been prostituted (44.7%) and engaged in routine prostitution (35.6%). Silbert<sup>[28]</sup> finds that almost all the young women (96%) were runaways prior to starting prostitution and almost all the subjects (94%) felt very negatively about themselves just prior to starting prostitution.

Running away from home may turn children to the streets and then become homeless<sup>[9,16]</sup>. McIntyre<sup>[19]</sup> reports many young people 'gravitate' towards the streets because they feel their 'street family' is able to look after their needs. In addition, they also feel wanted, nurtured, supported and protected. However, living on the streets with the vulnerability resulting from psychological effects of early sexual abuse, inferiority complex, insecurity, social dislocation, with no safe place to sleep and with little or no money for food or shelter exposes these young people to a greater danger of sexual victimization beyond exploitation through prostitution<sup>[11,22]</sup>. These children become the easiest target of pimps and sexual predators<sup>[7]</sup>.

One study finds that being homeless for longer than 30 days is the single most determinative factor causing runaways to be prostitution victims<sup>[21]</sup>. This is because they will be approached for sex or lured into prostitution within 36-48 h of being on the streets<sup>[11]</sup>. Johnson<sup>[16]</sup> reports the longer children remain on the streets, the less likely they are to return home and the more likely they will be forced to turn to prostitution in order to survive. However, Flowers<sup>[7]</sup> argues that no matter what the reason is for the children to have left home and how long they stayed on the streets, these children are at high risk of entering prostitution since they do not have adults to care for them.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Child prostitution in nature is a difficult and sensitive subject. Still, there is an urgent need to research it<sup>[20]</sup>. One of the reasons for this research is because, as a society, we in Malaysia have very limited knowledge of the phenomenon, as well as limited explanation of the involvement of children<sup>[7]</sup> Dean and Thomson<sup>[4]</sup>. Many

aspects are still unknown and are pretty much concealed from society.

In this research, the use of the children-centered approach would seem to be the right choice, considering that children in prostitution are victims of sexual exploitation, whereby the nature of the phenomenon is sensitive and the scale of research is small. This approach is concerned with the pressures and influences that affect children involved in research more than other approaches<sup>[1]</sup>. It has the ability to minimize any possible risk to the children resulting from the research. In principle, the approach places children at the centre of the research process, regarding them as socially competent and worthy of investigation<sup>[15]</sup>. It recognizes children as knowledgeable individuals who know about their own worlds more than adults<sup>[30]</sup>. Adults do not always know everything about children's worlds, what they are doing and thinking<sup>[25]</sup>. This approach would also be an advantage to the children because it gives them opportunities to address their situation without adult interventions.

This research was conducted with the participation of young women safeguarded from prostitution in two rehabilitation centers. Both centers are located in Peninsular Malaysia (West Malaysia). In this research, both quantitative and qualitative methods are used. According to Poindexter<sup>[23]</sup> the use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods is often considered the best and most efficient approach to collecting in-depth and complete information for research, since the two compliment each other and make up for what the other method lacks. The advantage of using these methods is that it allows such a difficult target group of young women in prostitution to be approached with respect to their rights, vulnerability, safety and confidentiality.

A total of 86 sexually exploited young women were interviewed, which represents a 100% of the total residents in both centers who consented to participate in the research. However, only 63 residents were considered relevant for the research. Of those eliminated, 17 were found not involved in any activity related to prostitution, while six young women refused to take part in this research.

**RESULTS**

Table 1 shows the age of respondents who participated in this survey. The youngest respondent was 13 years old and the oldest was 18. Nearly 89% of them were between 16-18 years old and about 11% were 13-15. The average age of the respondents was

Table 1: Age of respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
13	1	1.6
14	1	1.6
15	5	7.9
16	14	22.2
17	14	22.2
18	28	44.4
Total	63	100.0

Table 2: Frequency of runaway

Frequency of runaway	Frequency	Percentage
1-2 times	19	35.8
3-4 times	10	18.9
5-6 times	11	20.8
7-8 times	4	7.5
9-10 times	3	5.7
More than 10 times	6	11.3
Total	53	100.0

Table 3: Reasons for running away from home

Reasons	Frequency	Percentage
Depressed with the family situation	15	28.3
Influenced by a friend or boyfriend	15	28.3
Problems with mother/stepmother	12	22.6
Fights with brother/sister	6	11.3
Problems with father/stepfather	5	9.4
Total	53	100.0

16.95 years old. Young women of 18 years old were the majority of the respondents (44.4%) who participated in this survey.

The incidence of running away from home among the young women interviewed was excessive. Of the 63 respondents, 84.1% (53 respondents) ran away from home at least once. Nearly 36% ran away once or twice, 39.7% between 3 to 6 times and 13.2 % between 7-10 times (Table 2). Six respondents ran away from home more than 10 times.

Table 3 shows the majority of these young women ran away from home because they felt depressed with their family situation (28.3%), were influenced by friends or boyfriends (28.3%), or because they were having problems with their mothers/stepmothers (22.6%). A few respondents mentioned that they ran away from home because of problems they faced with their fathers/stepfathers (9.4%) and because of frequent fights they had with brothers or sisters (11.3%).

When counterchecked with problems faced at home, 81% (51 respondents) of the 63 respondents reported they had problems at home. About 35% faced only one problem, but the majority (64.6%) had suffered from multiple problems at home (Table 4). Two respondents faced as much as five problems concurrently.

Table 4: Number of problems at home

No. of problems	Frequency	Percentage
1	18	35.3
2	18	35.3
3	9	17.6
4	4	7.8
5	2	3.9
Total	51	100.0

Table 5: Types of problem at home

Types of problem	Frequency	Percentage
Parental lack of love and attention (emotional neglect)	39	76.5
Family members always fighting	36	70.6
Parental lack of responsibility (physical neglect)	13	25.5
Parental substance abuse	8	15.7
Parental gambling	7	13.7
Parental tight discipline	4	7.8
Parental mental health problem	1	2.0

Note: The respondents gave more than one answers

Table 6: The effect of the problems at home

Effects	Frequency	Percentage
Feel neglected	40	78.4
Feel stress/tension	28	54.9
Feel no freedom	5	9.8

Table 5 shows the list of problems faced by respondents at home. There are four major problems frequently cited by the young women: parental lack of love and attention (emotional neglect) (76.5%), family members always fights particularly between father and mother (70.6%), parental lack of responsibility or physical neglect (25.5%) and parental substance abuse and/or gambling (29.4%). A few reported they had suffered from a tight discipline at home (7.8%) and mother's mental problem (2.0%).

All the young women who had problems at home agreed that they had had a significant impact on their life. About 78% believed the problems made them feel neglected, 54.9% experienced stress or tension and 9.8% felt a lack of freedom (Table 6). Many were found to have suffered from multiple psychological impacts.

## DISCUSSION

The research finds that 84.1% of the young women interviewed were running away from home. The findings are consistent with previous studies, where 77-90% of children in prostitution reported running from home at least once before turning to prostitution<sup>[6,7,13,31]</sup>. Yet, the current study finds that many young women had an extensive history of running away during childhood compared to the Raphael and Shapiro's<sup>[24]</sup> findings above. The reasons given for running away were primarily due to feeling depressed over the family

situation, the influence of friends or boyfriends and because of problems with their mothers/stepmothers.

These reasons are not surprising as the majority of these young women felt neglected and stressed due to difficult life experiences at home, with parental lack of love and attention (emotional neglect), family member always fighting, parental lack of responsibility (physical neglect) and parental substance abuse and gambling. As reported by other researchers above, these young women also ran away from dysfunctional homes in order to flee from violence, physical abuse and emotional abuse<sup>[8-10,26]</sup>. Closer examination finds that young women who ran away from home at least once were vulnerable to be drawn into prostitution and even more so for those who ran away several times in their lifetime. Two respondents in this study provided a good example of this process:

Three years ago, I thought that by running away from home, I could prove to my father that even without his love and support I would still survive and have a successful life. I was desperately trying to prove that life would be better of without him. That it was wrong of him to divorce my mother and not let me see her. I wanted him to know that he was the worst father in the world. He was cruel, ruthless and hurtful to his own daughter. I wanted him to realize that he had made the biggest mistake in his life by neglecting me and marrying my stepmother. Alas, those things never happened. Instead, I ended up being a prostitute, trading my body for money.

(Rozana, a 15 year-old victim of prostitution).

Actually that was not the first time I ran away from home. I did more than five times before. Every time I faced disciplinary action at school, I would runaway from home ... My drug problem worsened during my stay with Mamat. I became totally dependent on marijuana. Mamat would not always give me the drug for free. Sometimes, I needed to find money to buy it from him. Therefore, I traded sex with other gang members, as well as with Mamat's flatmates. Some paid for sex with money, while others with drugs.

(Dilla, a 13 year-old victim of prostitution).

Depressed with ones family situation is part of the emotional neglect and abuse faced by these children at home. Hunter<sup>[12]</sup> finds that childhood emotional abuse is considered more significant in relation to the involvement of young women in prostitution than childhood sexual and physical abuse. She reports that of the 123 survivors of prostitution, 85% reported having a history of incest, 90% a history of physical abuse and 98% a history of emotional abuse during childhood. Emotional neglect and abuse turns the children to the

streets to find love and affection they lost or never received from their own families<sup>[4,7]</sup>.

### CONCLUSION

To sum up, neglect, abuse and violence at home appear to be contributing factors towards children running away from home, thus leading them into prostitution. It is important to note that not all runaway children end up in prostitution and that not all prostituted children are runaways. However, an unstructured and unsupervised childhood, emotional deficiencies and other family crises increase the probability that runaways will engage in prostitution.

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