
Early Sexual Exploitation as an Influence in Prostitution

MOST OF THE research on the sexual exploitation of juveniles has focused its attention on the offenders and their families.¹ In the few studies that have focused on the victims, the samples have not consisted of subjects chosen from a general population of victims but have included only those victims who have sought help from agencies that provide therapeutic services.² Thus, the samples do not represent victims whose experience may not have had a negative impact on them or victims whose experience may have had such a negative impact that they do not even discuss the problem or seek help.

There are numerous references in the literature to early sexual exploitation in the background of prostitutes.³ The problem with most of the research on prostitution is that it tends to be limited either to women arrested and jailed or to those who had sought therapeutic help. The study reported in this article represents the first major systematic attempt to determine whether street prostitutes were sexually exploited during their childhood. Its target population was unique in that it consisted of street prostitutes who were not recruited through any agency and who were usually hostile to the academic world and unavailable to social scientists for research.

METHOD

The interviewers in the study were members of the Delancey Street Foundation, a self-help residential facility known for its work with prostitutes, criminals, and drug addicts. All the interviewers had been juvenile or adult prostitutes. Given the sensitivity of the subject matter as well as the lack of trust among the target population for professionals and offi-

**Mimi H. Silbert
Ayala M. Pines**

Were street prostitutes sexually exploited during their childhood? The study reported represents the first major systematic attempt to address this question. It reports on the negative and long-term effects of the exploitation and draws implications for the treatment of victims.

cials of the "square" world, the credibility of the interviewers was of critical importance. Because the interviewers reflected the makeup of the sample, their credibility was established. They could understand the subjects' jargon and lifestyle and established the immediate rapport necessary to create the kind of atmosphere conducive to the subjects' sharing of painful emotions and experiences. All interviewers participated in three weeks of intensive training, which covered interviewing techniques and the basics of research methodology. Emphasis was put on uniformity of presentation, common usage and definition of terms, uniformity of scoring, and sensitivity to the needs of the subjects.

A special instrument, the Sexual Assault Experiences Questionnaire, was developed for the purposes of the study. In its final form it had the following parts: (1) background information, (2) history of sexual assault during adulthood, (3) history of sexual exploitation during childhood,

and (4) plans for the future. The second part of the questionnaire was administered to all subjects on the assumption that entry into prostitution effectively forced them to function as adults rather than children. The third part of the questionnaire was administered only to those subjects who indicated that they had been sexually abused as children. For each case of sexual exploitation, a series of questions inquired about the following: (1) age at time of first assault, frequency of assault, witnesses to the abuse, reporting of the abuse, and action taken as a result of reporting, (2) the relationship of the assailant to the victim, his approximate age, and his use of alcohol and drugs, (3) type of force used and sexual acts involved, and (4) the physical and emotional states of the victims and their attitudes toward men, themselves, and sex after the exploitation and the effect of the abuse on the victims' decision to enter prostitution. The whole series of questions was repeated separately for each male who had sexually molested the subject in her youth.

Sample

Two hundred current and former female prostitutes in the San Francisco Bay Area served as subjects in the study. Public service announcements and distribution of leaflets and cards were the major methods of recruitment. Many came through informal word of mouth. All subjects volunteered to take part in the study.

The questionnaire was individually administered to the 200 street prostitutes. Responses to questions posed by the interviewers were coded directly into categories on the questionnaire during the course of the interview; responses were also tape recorded and transcribed. Interviews lasted from two to four hours, depending on the number of incidents

of sexual abuse reported by the subject.

The mean age of the subjects was 22. The youngest subject was 10; the oldest, 46. Seventy percent of the current prostitutes were under 21; about 60 percent were 16 and under; many were 10-13 years old. Seventy-eight percent became prostitutes as juveniles.

Sixty-eight percent of the subjects were white; 18 percent, black; 11 percent, Hispanic; 2 percent, American Indian; and 1 percent, Asian. Sixty-eight percent were single and had never married, 22 percent were divorced, separated, or widowed; and only 10 percent were either married or living under common law. Although two-thirds of the sample came from families of middle or higher incomes, the average financial situation of all the subjects interviewed was described as "just making it."

RESULTS

Results of the study documented high levels of victimization of street prostitutes before and following their entrance into prostitution. Sixty percent of the subjects were sexually exploited as juveniles by an average of two males each. (This mean included as many as eleven abusers.) Over an average period of twenty months, each abuser assaulted the child an average of two or three times (one time, 30 percent of the subjects; two or three times, 20 percent; repeatedly, 49 percent; cannot ascertain, 1 percent). Victims ranged in age from 3 to 16, with the mean age of victimization being 10 years. Two-thirds of the women were sexually abused by their fathers or surrogate fathers: 33 percent of the women were sexually abused by their natural fathers; 30 percent, by their stepfathers or foster fathers; and 4 percent, by their mothers' common-law husbands. Twenty-eight percent were sexually abused by their brothers; 17 percent, by their uncles; 15 percent, by other relatives; 31 percent, by friends of the family, neighbors, and acquaintances; and 10 percent, by strangers.

The average sex abuser was in his thirties. Fifty-eight percent of the subjects indicated that the abusers were drinking or using drugs when the sexual exploitation occurred, and 14 percent were unsure whether the abusers were under the influence. Fifty-four percent reported that it

was usually dark outside, and 7 percent were unsure. Of the 17 percent who revealed that there were witnesses to the abuse, 98 percent indicated that no one came to their aid. When the subjects were asked to explain why they were left unprotected, they often responded that "he was the one supposed to do the protecting."

In 81 percent of the cases, some sort of force was used: physical force, 25 percent; emotional coercion (either promises or threats), 23 percent; and both emotional and physical force, 33 percent. On the average, four acts of force were involved in each case of abuse. Yet in some cases, as many as eleven acts of force were used. The most frequent act of force used by the abuser was holding the girl down, which occurred in 61 percent of the cases. Other frequent coercions were the following: promising love and implying that sexual intercourse was a show of love (48 percent of the cases), implying that sexual relations was her duty if she loved him (44 percent), and verbally threatening her (40 percent). In 31 percent of the cases, the abusers hit or beat the girls; in 29 percent, they squeezed or twisted the girls' arms; in 25 percent, they threatened to withdraw love; in 22 percent, they locked up the girls; and in 1 percent, they used a weapon.

Fifty-nine percent of the subjects reported that there was vaginal penetration with the penis: 6 percent, vaginal penetration with an object; 10 percent, anal penetration with the penis; and 5 percent, anal penetration with an object. Thirty-six percent of the incidences of abuse involved fellatio; 43 percent, masturbating the man; 13 percent, cunnilingus; 32 percent, masturbating the girl; 49 percent, fondling the breasts and genitals; 20 percent, kissing lips; and 2 percent, pornographic picture taking.

The subjects reported that the sexual exploitation often produced severe physical harm. Sixty-eight percent received bruises, 51 percent suffered cuts, 19 percent suffered shock, 3 percent had broken bones, and 2 percent had concussions. The vast majority of the young victims lost their virginity through the sexual exploitation. Five percent of the victims became pregnant, 10 percent got a venereal disease, 26 percent required medication, and 26 percent required medical follow-up.

The immediate emotional harm reported by the victims was also severe: "I felt disgusted by sex," "I felt dirty," and "I felt terrible" were most frequently mentioned. The average response was "terrible": $\bar{x} = 1.4$ (1 = terrible; 5 = good). Only 1 percent of the women reported feeling good or feeling loved. At the time of the assault, 73 percent were frightened during the experience, 53 percent felt disgusted by sex, 56 percent were confused and shocked and did not know how to react, 49 percent hated their abusers, 44 percent felt guilty and thus blamed and hated themselves, 41 percent cried, 40 percent became afraid of men, 11 percent tried to forget the exploitation, and 9 percent felt nothing. In addition, 91 percent believed that there was nothing they could do about the exploitation. When asked why they believed this, 55 percent reported that they did not know what to do, and 36 percent indicated that they were afraid of the repercussions or were too ashamed to do anything about it.

A series of questions inquired about the long-term effects the experience had on the way the subject felt about herself, about men, about sex, and about someone else in the family (usually the mother). Only 1 or 2 percent of the subjects responded positively to each question. All the rest of the subjects reported negative feelings about themselves ($\bar{x} = 1.6$), about men ($\bar{x} = 1.4$), about sex ($\bar{x} = 1.6$), and about their mothers ($\bar{x} = 1.8$). Furthermore, in response to the question inquiring about the effect of the abuse on the victims' decision to become a prostitute, 70 percent reported that the exploitation affected their decision.

In 17 percent of the cases, the girls ran away from home to avoid the sexual abuse; in 2 percent, they tried to commit suicide. Only 1 percent went to court, 1 percent tried to hurt the abusers physically, and 4 percent tried to hurt them in other ways, such as writing hurtful letters.

In 63 percent of the cases, the subject never told anyone about the sexual exploitation until the present study. Of the 37 percent who did tell, 68 percent of them told their mothers; 26 percent told siblings, other relatives, or friends; 2 percent discussed the exploitation with teachers; 2 percent reported it to the police; 1 per-

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cent told social workers; ½ percent told people who worked in the medical field; and ½ percent discussed it with members of the clergy. Respondents indicated that of the people who were told (1) 12 percent expressed sympathy for them, (2) 45 percent voiced their anger toward the abusers, (3) 32 percent showed hostility toward the victims, (4) 26 percent responded in disbelief, and (5) 9 percent were ashamed of the victims. In 9 percent of the cases, there was no response. Fifty-eight percent of the women reported that telling about their sexual exploitation had a bad effect on their relationship with the person who was told. The average score on the item inquiring about this relationship was 2.2 (1 = very bad effect; 2 = bad effect; 3 = mixed effect; 4 = good effect; 5 = very good effect). In addition, 52 percent of the subjects felt that the people they told about the sexual exploitation were disappointed in them, and 49 percent felt that the people they told blamed them for the incident.

In only 21 percent of the cases did the abuse stop after the girl told someone about the exploitation. In 42 percent of the cases, no action was taken; in 22 percent, telling resulted in some other action such as moving to another city; in 5 percent, the family broke up; in 4 percent, the man was punished by the courts, either for the exploitation or for another crime for which the mother turned him in; in 2 percent, the girl was punished; in 2 percent, an authority or doctor was notified; and in 2 percent, the information was shared with other people, but no action resulted. Thus, the few girls who dared discuss their abuse were often confronted with blame and shame and, in most cases, inaction as well.

DISCUSSION

In the present study, only 10 percent of the subjects were abused by strangers. De Francis found that the sexual abuser is a stranger in 25 per-

cent of the cases.⁴ That a significantly smaller number of subjects in the present study reported being sexually abused by strangers is important in light of those studies reporting that sexual assault by a stranger seems to result in fewer psychological difficulties for the child.⁵ One reason that may explain the latter finding is that sexual abuse by a stranger is likely to be a one-time occurrence. In contrast, intrafamilial abuse is likely to continue over an extended period of time (and indeed the abuse in the present study was repeated over an average period of twenty months). Weisberg et al. noted that frequently the abuse terminates only upon disclosure, intervention by the authorities, or the victim's marrying or leaving home for some other reasons.⁶ In the present study, running away was often the only way the subject could escape the abuse at home. Indeed, most of the victims never told anyone about the abuse until the interview. Only 1 percent reported the abuse to a social worker, and only 2 percent reported it to the police.

In contrast to the prevalence of force in the incidents of sexual abuse reported in the present study (an average of four acts of force per victim), some of the prior research described the victim as a passive or seductive partner in the abuse. For example, Radzinowicz reported that the victims in 66-95 percent of all the sex offenses "encouraged" the offenders.⁷ Gagnon described victims of sexual abuse as having a "collaborative role" in 8 percent of the cases.⁸ Weiss et al. noted that the victims fully participated in 60 percent of the offenses, and Glueck described 21 percent of the victims as seducers.⁹ In addition to the quantitative data reported in this article, a content analysis of the qualitative data (lengthy descriptions of 178 of the 200 prostitutes) stands in clear contrast to the literature that reports on the collaborative role of the victim.

There is little systematic evidence about the short- and long-term effects

of sexual exploitation on children: what literature does exist opens the subject to conflicting interpretations. Gager and Schurr reviewed the expert opinions in the field which hold that negative effects have been exaggerated.¹⁰ Some of these experts argue that sex relationships between a young child and an adult may be beneficial to the child, that overt incest would be less harmful to victims' personality development than repressed incestuous desires, and that the sexual exploitation of children before puberty has less chance of causing psychological damage than exploitation after puberty.¹¹ In contrast, the results of the present study document the high prevalence of physical and emotional harm and the negative attitudes toward men, sex, and self produced by the sexual abuse.

There is, however, research data that support the present study's findings. For example, De Francis, in his study of more than 250 cases of sexual abuse, reported that 67 percent of the children were emotionally damaged by the experience, that 14 percent were extremely disturbed, and that 11 percent became pregnant. Tormes studied twenty victims of incest and found that all the victims were severely oppressed by the experience and showed symptoms of depression, low self-esteem, and a heightened sense of guilt.¹² Kaufman, Peck, and Tagiuri administered psychological tests to seven girls who were sexually abused and found that although the victims presented a facade of adjustment and stability, they were often depressed and felt responsible for family disruption after their mothers' discovery of the incest.¹³ Confusion over their sexual identity and a fear of sexuality were also found among the young women.

The negative impacts of the sexual exploitation were evident in the subjects of the present study even at the time of the interview, which in many cases took place years after the abuse. Similar long-term effects of sexual

abuse of children were reported in the literature.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that (1) most of the studies that found long-term negative effects of sexual abuse were recent studies that involved a large number of cases and (2) those that found no negative impacts of rape were done in the 1950s and often involved psychoanalytic reports of a small number of cases. The most frequently cited long-term effects included bitterness, hostility, and distrust toward adults; severe conflicts involving guilt, shame, and depression; behavioral disorders; psychiatric illness; and disturbance in the behavior of victims as parents such as the mistreatment of their children.

Another characteristic noted in the literature is a tolerance or seeking out of relationships in which one is victimized. Meiselman found that women who were abused during their childhood were willing to tolerate mistreatment, which allowed them to endure abusive relationships with husbands and boyfriends.¹⁵ The present study found a similar pattern but suggested that the willingness of subjects to endure abusive relationships (such as those with pimps and with customers) is related to a developed sense of "psychological paralysis" in which the subjects have been unable to make sense of a series of early abuses and therefore react with inaction, depression, and self-blame. As the abuses continue and as their ability to make sense of them diminishes, the women retreat into a totally passive role in which they feel powerless, out of control of their life, debilitated, and psychologically paralyzed.

Several studies noted the characteristics of promiscuity, sexual problems, and homosexuality among women who were sexually abused as juveniles.¹⁶ The present study corroborates these findings. For example, 60 percent of the subjects were considered promiscuous while juveniles. Seventy percent of the subjects felt that the sexual abuse affected their decision to become a prostitute. Yet it is important to remember that because there was no control group in the study (that is, children who may have been abused but did not become prostitutes), the study could not show that sexual abuse leads to prostitution.

The present study also found that sexual abuse affected sexual prefer-

ence. Only 8 percent of the subjects in the present study were lesbians, but of those who reported being lesbian, 60 percent were sexually exploited as juveniles. The influence of early sexual abuse as a contributing factor to homosexual orientation was noted by Meiselman, Weisberg et al., and Kaufman, Peck, and Tagliari.¹⁷

More significant than the relationship between the sexual exploitation of juveniles and homosexuality is the relationship between asexuality and such exploitation. In the present study, 14 percent of the subjects reported being asexual; moreover, of those subjects who were asexual, 96 percent were sexually abused as juveniles. Similar findings were found when the frequency of orgasm was reported. Close to 50 percent of all the subjects in the study reported almost never reaching an orgasm.

IMPLICATIONS

The study's findings document an urgent need to provide services for juvenile victims of sexual exploitation. There is little literature devoted to interventions exclusively for juveniles who have been sexually exploited. The majority of the existing literature is devoted to family treatment for victims of incest.¹⁸

Findings of the present study suggest different points at which victim-oriented intervention services are needed: (1) at the time of the exploitation (medical and psychological service should be provided within a supportive and caring environment whenever abuse is suspected), (2) at the time the juvenile runs away from home because of sexual exploitation (at bus depots, where juvenile run-aways often are recruited for prostitution, outreach workers are needed to offer them counseling and alternative options), and (3) at the time a juvenile street prostitute experiences sexual abuse (counseling and social support services should be available). The social worker who treats street prostitutes can assume they have a pattern of disturbed growth marked by physical, emotional, and sexual abuses and can help them share these experiences as the first step in therapy.

A critical area for social workers is the treatment of the psychological paralysis that underlies the inability of prostitutes to leave their self-destructive lifestyle. Before prosti-

tutes can take advantage of behavioral or environmental changes, they must learn to develop a sense of control over their lives. Recovery from the sense of paralysis requires a gradual reestablishment of feelings of personal power over some aspects of life, knowledge that their actions can affect outcomes, and the replacement of helplessness with a sense of control. The study suggests that the first focus of the social worker with this population be on the development of personal control and ability to exercise options to mitigate the sense of psychological paralysis that prevents clients from taking advantage of positive opportunities.

Mimi H. Silbert, Ph.D., is President, Delancey Street Foundation, San Francisco, California. Ayala M. Pines, Ph.D., is Research Associate, University of California at Berkeley. The research on which this article is based was sponsored through the Delancey Street Foundation by the National Center for the Prevention and Control of Rape, National Institute of Mental Health, Grant No. R01 MH 32782. The authors express thanks to Teri Lynch, Auristela Frias, JoAnn Mancuso, Charlotte Martin, and Alice Watson for their assistance in developing the instrument and in collecting the data.

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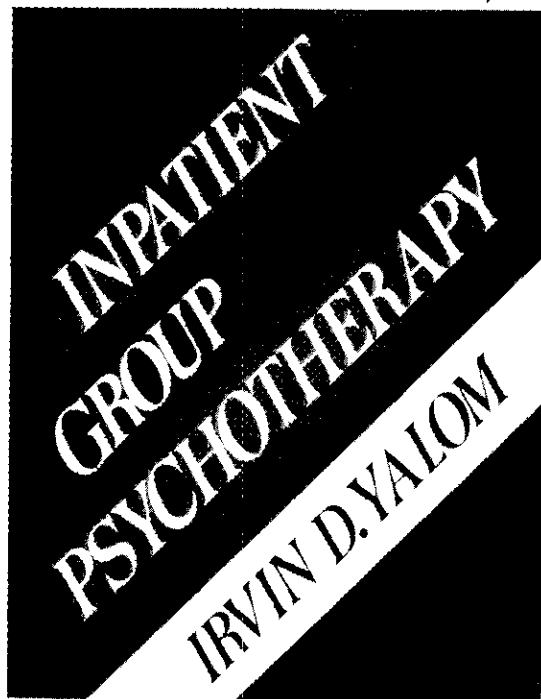
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