

Sexual exploitation and violence of prostituted children

Eksplorasi seksual dan kekerasan terhadap pelacur

Bagong Suyanto^{1*}, Medhy Aginta Hidayat², & Rendy Pahrun Wadipalapa³

¹Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Universitas Airlangga

²Department of Sociology, Faculty of Social and Cultural Sciences, Universitas Trunojoyo

³School of Politics and International Studies, University of Leeds

Address: ¹Jalan Dharmawangsa Dalam, Surabaya, East Java, Indonesia 60286

²Jalan Raya Telang, Bangkalan, Madura, East Java, Indonesia 69162

³Woodhouse, LS2 9JT, Leeds, United Kingdom

E-mail: bagong_fisip@yahoo.com*, medhy.hidayat@trunojoyo.ac.id, & ptrpw@leeds.ac.uk

Abstract

This study examines sexual exploitation and violence against prostituted children in East Java, Indonesia. Children who are involved in the commercial sex industry are generally prone to become victims of exploitation, violent acts, and other child abuse. This case study employs a qualitative research method to examine the various hardships experienced by prostituted children in East Java, Indonesia. The researchers interviewed ten prostituted children, seven “grey chickens” (female high school students doubling as prostituted children), eight former prostituted children, five pimps, eight procurers, and seven male customers in Surabaya City and Pasuruan Regency. This study found that, in the Indonesian commercial sex industry, prostituted children generally experience severe exploitation and violent acts. The children’s struggle to survive in the Indonesian prostitution business is a challenging condition because of their weak bargaining position: their subordinate status in the Indonesian patriarchal ideology, their weak position as children confronting adults, as well as their low socioeconomic position. The efforts to make policies to prevent exploitation and violence against prostituted children by the government and non-government agencies thus should take into account the conditions of the prostituted children as well as the driving factors for the child prostitution business that takes place in Indonesia.

Keywords: prostituted children; sexual exploitation; sexual violence; commercial sex industry

Abstrak

Artikel ini meneliti eksploitasi seksual dan kekerasan terhadap anak-anak yang dilacurkan di Jawa Timur, Indonesia. Anak-anak yang terlibat dalam industri seks komersial umumnya cenderung menjadi korban eksploitasi, tindak kekerasan, dan pelecehan oleh anak-anak lainnya. Studi kasus ini menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif untuk melihat berbagai kesulitan hidup yang dialami oleh anak-anak yang dilacurkan di Jawa Timur, Indonesia. Peneliti mewawancarai sepuluh anak yang dilacurkan, tujuh “ayam abu-abu” (siswa sekolah menengah yang bekerja sebagai anak-anak yang dilacurkan), delapan mantan anak yang dilacurkan, lima mucikari, delapan makelar, dan tujuh pelanggan pria di Kota Surabaya dan Kabupaten Pasuruan. Studi ini menemukan bahwa di industri seks komersial Indonesia, anak-anak yang dilacurkan umumnya mengalami eksploitasi dan tindak kekerasan. Perjuangan anak-anak untuk bertahan hidup dalam bisnis prostitusi Indonesia adalah kondisi yang menantang karena posisi tawar mereka yang lemah: status bawahan mereka dalam ideologi patriarki Indonesia, posisi lemah mereka sebagai anak-anak yang berhadapan dengan orang dewasa, serta posisi sosial ekonomi mereka yang rendah. Upaya-upaya untuk membuat kebijakan untuk mencegah eksploitasi dan kekerasan terhadap anak-anak yang dilacurkan, oleh pemerintah dan lembaga non-pemerintah, dengan demikian harus mempertimbangkan kondisi anak-anak yang dilacurkan serta faktor-faktor pendorong bisnis prostitusi anak yang terjadi di Indonesia.

Kata kunci: pelacur anak-anak; eksploitasi seksual; kekerasan seksual; industri seks komersial

Introduction

The prostitution of children is a part of the global sex industry. Weitzer (2010) stated that the global sex industry includes prostitution, pornographic pictures, pornographic magazines and videos, strip dances, sex telephone, sex toys, as well as child and woman trafficking. In the 21st century, with

the pressure from some humanitarian organizations supporting children's rights protection, many parties have insisted on stopping the practice of prostitution. As a form of violations of children's fundamental rights, prostitution of children has provoked global protests from feminist groups concerned about the protection of children's rights. However, since the financial circulation in the prostitution business is tremendous, it generally still exists and even continues to grow in many places globally (Sullivan 2007).

The United Nations defines prostitution of children as the act of engaging or offering the services of a child to perform sexual acts for money or other consideration with that person or any other person (Lim 1998). Meanwhile, the convention on the rights of the child's optional protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution, and child pornography defines the practice as the act of obtaining, procuring or offering the services of a child or inducing a child to perform sexual acts for any form of compensation or reward (Lim 1998). Another definition from the worst forms of child labour convention 1999, (Convention No.182) of the International Labour Organization (ILO) describes the practice of prostitution of children as the use, procuring or offering of a child for prostitution (International Labour Organization 1999). All of these mentioned definitions emphasize that, in the case of child prostitution, the child is a victim of exploitation.

However, the terminology applied to the practice of prostitution of children often becomes a subject of dispute. Some groups of scholars and activists that oppose the practice believe that the terms "child prostitution" and "child prostitute" carry problematic connotations because children are generally not expected to be able to make informed decisions about their act of being in the prostitution business (Appleton 2014). As an alternative, they use terms such as "prostituted children" and "the commercial sexual exploitation of children" (Appleton 2014, Firmin et al. 2016). On the other side, other groups of scholars and activists prefer to use the term "child sex worker" to imply that the children are not always "passive victims" of the prostitution business (Rodriguez 2011). Concerning the terminology, this study uses the term "prostituted children," instead of "child prostitute," to refer to the idea that the underage prostitutes and "grey chickens" in this case study are not expected to be able to make informed decisions about their act of being in the prostitution business. 'Grey chicken' is a term commonly used by the media outlets in Indonesia, referring to the female high school students prostitutes wearing white blouse and grey skirt school uniform (Suyanto 2017). Moreover, the term prostituted children used in this study refers to the idea of children as passive victims.

Many studies have found that, with their miserable life background, the prostituted children had not had many options for their unfortunate lives. Perschler-Desai (2001) found that, in South Africa, children are involved in prostitution business primarily because of family poverty and the need to earn money for their family. From the economic perspective, due to the high income of the business, prostitution can be categorized as a high-paying job, and almost no other similar traditional work can match the income generated from the prostitution business (Edlund & Korn 2002). Miles (2000), Sahri & Shankar (2013), Swendeman et al. (2015) also found similar findings that powerlessness, poverty, and the loss of an essential figure in the family, often drive children in India and Sri Lanka to work as prostitutes.

Moreover, Davidson (2002) also found that, in China, the pressure of family poverty and low education often lead children into the prostitution business. For unskilled and socioeconomically marginalized women, the employment opportunity in the sex industry is very tempting. In China's case, with the gaps between the rural and the urban area, the regions of the affluent and the poor, the urban dwellers and the migrants, and the majority and minority ethnic groups, the chance of the poor children being caught up in prostitution business is very high. In a rapidly growing area of China such as Shenzhen, the sex industry is generally filled by migrant women and children from the village who have difficulty finding jobs in their rural areas. For example, the daughters of poor migrant workers in China are more easily trapped in the prostitution business due to their poverty and low education.

On the other hand, Homma et al. (2012) showed that their economic vulnerability does not solely drive the involvement of children in prostitution. Several studies have indeed indicated that sex workers' earnings are relatively higher compared to workers in other jobs dominated by women

with low educational background. Homma claimed that children engaged in prostitution are not solely because of the desire to earn quick money. Instead, the underage children falling into the commercial sex industry are often triggered by their powerlessness condition within the exploitative and marginalized structure of the patriarchal ideology (Jones 2009, Yamato 2000). Truong (2002) clearly states that the theoretical explanation of child prostitution from a one-sided perspective is incomplete and ahistorical. A child who falls into prostitution is not only because of poverty but also because of the marginalization and stigmatization process (Davis 2008). Jones (2009) also found that the children who fall into the prostitution business are usually the victims of public stigmatization that discriminate against them as no longer virgins.

Many previous studies have shown that the practice of child prostitution is very vulnerable to sexual exploitation and violence (Appleton 2014, Firmin et al. 2016, Fredlund et al. 2018, Hounmenou 2016, Miles 2000, Soylu & Alpaslan 2013, Sullivan 2007, Suyanto 2012, Weitzer 2010). In certain limits, sexual exploitation and violence of prostituted children maybe even worse than the exploitation and violence of the adult sex workers. It may occur because the prostituted children are usually powerless and do not dare to resist the pressure from other parties, such as the madams, pimps, or their customers. On the other hand, adult sex workers usually dare to refuse if they feel the same parties are mistreating them. The various forms of sexual exploitation and violence toward the prostituted children found in this case study included: being treated like toys or commodities or objects, being forced to work for long hours, being forced to serve customers. At the same time, they are menstruating, being forced to serve customers even when they are sick, being forced to serve many customers, being forced to do deviant sexual activities (oral, anal, and sadomasochism), getting a small share of wages, and experiencing verbal and physical violence if they dare to oppose the madams or customers' requests.

The impact of child sexual abuse, in the case of sexual exploitation and violence experienced by prostituted children, will be carried on until their adult life. Hounmenou & O'Grady (2019) revealed that, in the earlier years post-trauma, the victims described their experience as chaotic and stressful. Only when specific events or turning points occur, with the help of social support and interpersonal connections, could it prompt the victims of sexual abuse to evaluate their lives and lead to a realization of the possibilities of change. As suggested by Brawn & Roe-Sepowitz (2008), Sawrikar & Katz (2017), child sexual abuse, including child prostitution, might result in a long-term adult diagnosis of depression. For the prostituted children who could not resist depression, it is not impossible that they will choose to commit suicide (Soylu & Alpaslan 2013), even though, from the media reports, there are no data of the prostituted children in Indonesia who have committed suicide.

Child prostitution is an illegal activity in Indonesia (Suyanto 2012), however, studies of the prostituted children phenomenon have not been widely conducted, although many previous studies have examined adult prostitution practices. Several reasons might cause a lack of research on the issue of child prostitution in Indonesia. First, because of its illegal nature, there are not many cases of child prostitution found in Indonesia. Second, if there are any cases of child prostitution found, it is not easy to gain access to the research subjects. Third, even if there is any access, it is not easy to make the child sex workers be open and tell their life stories. The sensitive nature of the issue and the fear if their identity and stories will be revealed to the public is one of the factors that increasingly complicate the study of child prostitution. Some similar studies carried out previously showed the same conditions of difficulty (Appleton 2014, Chase & Statham 2005, Hounmenou 2016, Hounmenou & O'Grady 2019, Poulin 2003, Sawrikar & Katz 2017, Suyanto 2012).

Some factors may cause the exploitation and violence of the prostituted children in Indonesia. Some literature tends to emphasize economic factors as the main driving factor for the sexual exploitation and violence of the prostituted children (Davidson 2002, Edlund & Korn 2002, Hounmenou & O'Grady 2019, Perschler-Desai 2006, Poulin 2003, Rodriguez 2011, Swendeman et al. 2015, Weitzer 2010). These economic factors include family poverty, difficulties in the family's economic conditions, difficulties in getting a job, high wages of the prostitution business, and not having the choice to support themselves financially; all are often considered as the main reasons for a child

falling into the world of the prostitution business. Although it must be admitted that economic factors are one of the essential driving factors for the exploitation and violence of the prostituted children, it is not the only determinant factor. By examining previous studies, this present study found that, in addition to the economic factors, there are social, structural, and cultural factors that also influence the practices of exploitation and violence of the prostituted children.

In East Java, Indonesia, two cities that have notoriously become the locations of the child prostitution business are Dolly, Surabaya, and Tretes, Pasuruan, a small town not far from Surabaya. In these two places, many brothels are offering prostituted children for men. Suyanto's research (2012, 2017) found that the prostituted children in Surabaya and Tretes consisted of two types, namely prostituted children who lived in brothels and prostituted children who lived outside brothels and doubled as "grey chickens." Despite having some differences, both types of these prostituted children face a similar reality of sexual exploitation and violence in their lives (Darwin 2004, Suyanto 2012, 2017). This present case study attempted to investigate the exploitation and violence of prostituted children in East Java, Indonesia. Two critical aspects examined in this case study are: 1) What kind of sexual exploitation and violence do the prostituted children in East Java, Indonesia, have to face? and 2) What are the factors causing the exploitation and violence experienced by the prostituted children in East Java, Indonesia?

Research Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative analysis method by utilizing data from field research and in-depth interviews (Denzin & Lincoln 2000). The case study was chosen as a method for this research study since the cases of child prostitution specifically took place in certain areas, namely in Surabaya City and Tretes Region, Pasuruan, East Java, Indonesia. This case study was aimed to examine the various forms and causal factors of the sexual exploitation and violence of the prostituted children in East Java, Indonesia. The definition of prostituted children in this study is females under the age of 18 years old who got involved in prostitution.

The selection process of the key informants in this study was conducted gradually while making field observations during the data collection process in Surabaya City and Tretes Region, Pasuruan Regency. The Surabaya field research took place at the Dolly brothels that had been forcibly closed by the Surabaya City Government in 2014. In reality, some homesteads are still operating covertly, serving male customers of commercial sexual services. Meanwhile, the Pasuruan field research took place in the Tretes region, where many local hostels had been notoriously known as a spot for prostitution. The researchers visited both of the places of study a couple of times by masquerading as customers in order to get access to the prostituted children. During the visits, the researchers initially met with thirteen prostituted children in both locations. However, three of them finally refused to get involved in the study, and only ten prostituted children have been interviewed for this study. Besides ten prostituted children, seven "grey chickens" also got involved in this study. Using the snowball method, the researchers met with these "grey chickens" informants from the recommendation of some prostituted children in Dolly, Surabaya. The youngest age of the prostituted children interviewed in the study was 14 years old, and the oldest was 17 years old.

This case study conducted in-depth interviews with 45 informants (Table 1). Ten prostituted children were interviewed as informants in this study, seven children from Dolly, Surabaya, and three children from Tretes, Pasuruan. This study also conducted in-depth interviews with eight former prostituted children to find out the course of their lives after years of becoming prostituted children. The researchers also selected these former prostituted children in Dolly, Surabaya and Tretes, Pasuruan, East Java, Indonesia. Moreover, this study interviewed five madams or procuresses (female brothel keepers), and five pimps as informants. There were seven male customers interviewed as informants in this case study. The customer informants in this case study were those who had not only used a prostituted children service but also had booked underage children at least twice in the last year. The interviews with the informants were initially challenging to carry out because they tended to be cautious when approached by strangers. When knowing they would be interviewed for the research, they usually did not permit because of shame or fear that their personal affairs would be revealed to the public.

The open-semi structured interviews in this study were carried out for about an hour and a half for each informant. For the prostitute informants, researchers paid for all of the interviews, and this payment was needed to protect the prostitutes from getting in trouble with their pimps. The interviews were mostly carried out twice or thrice, and they were only possible to be done during the working hours of the prostituted children since, at other times, they were always under the surveillance of the pimps. All of the interview results were translated into Bahasa for the analysis process, which included coding and compiling themes that frequently appeared in the interviews.

Table 1.
Informants and Location of the Study

Explanation	Area of studies		Total informants
	Surabaya	Tretes, Pasuruan	
Underage girls prostituted in brothels	7	3	10
Students who are prostituted or grey chicken*	7	0	7
Former child prostitutes who are stil whoring	5	3	8
Madam or procuress	3	2	5
Pimp or panderer	5	3	8
Male guest or customer	3	4	7
Total	30	15	45

*In Indonesia the grey chicken term is used to refer to female students in grey white uniform (high school students) who are also doubling as prostitutes.

The recruitment process for the informants of this case study was carried out carefully. During the on-site selection process, the researchers first introduced themselves as volunteers from Lembaga Perlindungan Perempuan dan Anak (PPA) or Women and Child Protection Unit and lecturers from Universitas Airlangga who were looking for research data of prostitution in East Java, Indonesia. However, at first, not all of the main prostituted children informants were willing to be interviewed. These informants only agreed to be interviewed after the researchers assured them that the informants' names and personal backgrounds would not be identified as the sources of this case study. Once the informants voluntarily agreed to get involved in this study, the researchers then asked them to sign the informed consent letter that guaranteed to protect their rights. The researchers of this study fully understood the risk and difficulty of this type of study; therefore the personal right protection of the informants was the priority during the study. By this understanding, all names of informants mentioned in this article have been changed for privacy. Moreover, before conducting the study, the researchers had already obtained a letter of research permission from Universitas Airlangga as well as a letter of consent from local village officials. The researchers already understood about the research ethics related to sensitive topics such as child prostitution. In the process of collecting data, for example, the researchers always upheld and placed the best interests of the prostituted children above any other interests.

Results and Discussions

In this section, two specific themes that show up over time during the data analysis will be presented in detail. These two themes include the initial effects of being prostitutes for children in Indonesia and the forms of exploitation and violence of prostituted children in Indonesia.

The initial effects of being prostitutes for children

In the prostitution business, the younger sex workers were generally more favored than, the older ones. This case study found that the high interest of the consumers for prostituted children was more for psychological reasons than other reasons, namely the male tendency to express their dominance in the relation between them and the prostituted children. According to our informants who frequent the brothels, booking adult prostitutes were often considered less challenging because these adult prostitutes usually control the consumers. The myriad of experience possessed by the adult prostitutes often causes the consumers to become quickly satisfied, and the adult prostitutes were more in control of the situation. Meanwhile, when our informants booked the prostituted children, the sensation they

recognized was considered much more enjoyable. They stated that it was because of the lack of experience of the prostituted children that made the customers more passionate and confident about their virility and sexual ability.

Mr. Sofian (51) was a customer who often booked prostituted children in Dolly, Surabaya. He admitted that having sexual relations with the prostituted children caused a sensational experience that was different from the adult prostitutes. According to him, adult prostitutes were often good at pretending to serve their customers passionately, but they felt that they wanted to end the session quickly. For him, this kind of attitude coming from the adult prostitutes was very harmful. Mr. Sofian said that having sex with the underage children was generally more fun and satisfying because they were not yet skillful at pretending during the sexual activities. Mr. Sofian said more about the experience in this way:

“It’s different. Child prostitutes are easier to control. They are more obedient and not adventurous. They also seem to be inexperienced. It’s like still pure and not artificial. The way they deal with customers is different. When you got the adult prostitutes, you know the difference. They just want to go straight, just want to finish quickly. Sometimes even they did control the customers. Also, they often pretend to enjoy sexual activity when serving the customers. I think the most important thing for them is just to get quick money.”

Furthermore, for men who were accustomed to the prostitution business, the experience became thrilling when they had a sexual experience with children who were still virgins. Mr. Feri (47), a regular customer in Dolly since he was a high school student, described his sexual experience with a virgin girl. For him, the sensation of having a sexual experience with a virgin prostituted child was thrilling and exciting. Mr. Feri admitted that he had succeeded in booking virgin prostituted children twice for the rate of two million and three million rupiahs. However, he admitted that. Lately, it had become more challenging to find a virgin prostituted child— even though he was willing to pay much more than the previous service price.

For the prostituted children, the most traumatic phases of being prostituted children were the initial experiences of being plunged into the prostitution business. Many prostituted child informants of this study said that there was a raging war in their inner self from the feelings of guilt, confronting the demands of life, the feelings of no longer being virtuous, and so forth— all of which compounded to a traumatic experience. During this first moment, it was not uncommon when morning came, and the brothel was already closed, that these prostituted children cried alone in their rooms, some admitted to doing sholat or prayer, and others even thought to end their life by committing suicide. Tri (17) and Nuri (16) stated that they wanted to end their life immediately after they had to serve guests for the first time. For an innocent girl like Tri and Nuri, who were devout enough to do sholat or prayer, suddenly entering the vortex of life in the brothel was not a simple matter. Tri told her story as follows:

“In the past, when I first came in here (Dolly), I was so shocked. I kept crying every night. The plan was that I did not want to work here. But, really, I did not know it was already my fate. My friend said it is easy to get money here. I could not refuse, because my mother was ill and we needed money. I had been working as a housemaid. But my boss fired me because I was caught dating in my boss’ home. When I first served my guests, I cried all night, causing an uproar in the brothel. But, now, what else. It’s been my fate. I think I was lucky to have a friend here who taught me so that I can quickly forget my sadness.”

Although some of our informants in this study had once had sexual intercourse with their ex-boyfriends, having to serve strangers indeed caused feelings of being disgraced when the guests treated them like playthings. Mia (15), Mini (15), Linda (14), Sarah (17), and some other prostituted child informants in this study similarly stated that the saddest thing that riled them for the first time was guests who acted inconsiderately by asking them for bizarre services. Since the guests had already paid for the service, they thought they could do anything without considering how they felt.

According to the pimps, all prostituted children enter the brothels for the first time generally want to reject their destiny or what they have just experienced. However, with the support of their fellow senior prostitutes, these new prostituted children gradually accept their fate. In the commercial sex industry, the fallen prostituted children usually have no way back. For children who came from low-income families, who were the victims of child abuse, or had lost their virginity, there was not much they could expect in the future, except to go through their unfortunate destiny. Immediately, adaptation to the new world while asking help from their fellow prostitutes to do the job well often became the only option for these prostituted children.

Forms of exploitation and violence of prostituted children

Prostituted children, mostly those who lived in the brothels, often experienced various acts of sexual violence. This sexual violence includes being forced to serve customers. At the same time, they had menstruation, being asked to perform oral sex, becoming the objects of sodomy or anal sex, having to serve customers in large numbers every day, serving customers whose genitals were pierced, and serving a variety of sexual styles prompted by the customers. Rini (15) stated:

"I often have to serve very rude customers. Maybe because they feel they've paid me, so they feel like they can do anything they want. Sometimes there are those who force me to do deviant sexual styles, such as anal sex, or to force me to play for many times. I can't refuse. If I refuse I got the risks. Customers can be angry. And the madam will also be also angry at me. I was afraid."

Rini (15) said that, during her work in Dolly, she was forced to serve many customers with offensive behaviors. Most of her customers took stimulants or drugs before having sex, which boosts their stamina and causes pain to her body. Nevertheless, Rini did not dare to refuse this kind of offensive behavior as she would face her customers' and her madam's sanction. In the prostitution business, trying to refuse to serve the customers was seen as an action that may lead to sanctions, such as verbal reprimands, insults, or sometimes even physical violence. In the commercial sex industry, the law is that the guests were the Kings, and the prostituted children were the slaves who must comply with the command from their guests.

Moreover, the position of a madam or pimp was like an executioner who was always ready to impose sanctions when a slave dared to reject the request of the King. According to the prostituted children, a madam or pimp was often regarded as someone who could provide protection, yet she or he could also turn into a frightening threat. Some informants interviewed in this study stated that, in the prostitution business, whispering about the risks and treatments experienced by the prostituted children who dare to fight against the madam or pimp and refuse to serve guests was often far more effective in spreading and causing terror for them. For an innocent girl setting foot in the brothels for the first time, rumors about the harmful treatments if she dares to refuse orders of the madam or pimp, were often more effective as a means of control to restrain their moral defenses—without the need to be genuinely effectuating them. Mia (15), told her story as follows:

"I was slapped twice by my madam because I was unwilling to receive guests. Because the customer seemed to be rough. Also, he was old. I was reluctant. My friends said that this man likes to ask for all sorts and styles, and he would be angry if we refused. Not to mention the alcoholic odor of his mouth. I was afraid, so I avoided. But, my madam caught me, and then I was slapped twice. I now do not dare to refuse guests if my madam is present."

According to the madam, in the prostitution business, some of the taboo things done by the prostitutes were to reject the guests, to disappoint them, or to be willing to serve a small number of guests. One of the madams in Dolly, Surabaya, said that it was not acceptable for her girls in her brothels to reject guests. For the madam, the guest was the King that brought fortune so that the wheel of life in the brothels may keep running. A prostitute should not refuse serving guests, as long as the guest was willing to pay the agreed rates.

Another finding of exploitation and violence in this study was that the prostituted children were required to work for very long hours and had to accept a small margin of revenue sharing. For the prostituted children, they were continually working to serve the guests, undoubtedly brought in more revenue. Moreover, the favorite prostituted children were generally always sought by the customers. The risk was that the guests who booked them possibly brought a venereal disease that might be transmitted to them. Mini (15) told her account of working for long hours during the weekend:

“Weekends are always the hardest days. Usually, the customers are crowded. My madam insists all of us to stand by, ready to receive guests. I have almost eight hours of continuous reception of customers. More than ten guests a day. Very tiring. I could only cry. Sad, but I couldn’t do anything. I have to pay my parents’ debts. If I refuse, my salary is deducted. I was also would be scolded by my madam. Sometimes I got beaten by the pimps.”

Even though this study did not find any informants who were affected by HIV/AIDS, from their account, it was known that some of their fellow prostitutes were already infected with HIV/AIDS. In the commercial sex industry, when the prostituted children or even adult prostitutes were caught with HIV/AIDS, there was no other choice but to leave and accept the risk of their work. Some informants said that because they served too many guests for a long working hour, they quickly caught venereal diseases disseminated by their guests. Lastri (15), one of our informants, said that she has to go to the Health Center for treatment when she is repeatedly exposed to venereal disease. Lastri admitted that, when she suffers from a sexually transmitted disease (STD), it usually takes a long time to recover. Nevertheless, during the healing period, she still has to serve the guests:

“I knew I had contracted a sexual disease after I’d been here for six months. I had to go to the Puskesmas (Health Center). My madam set the time when I could get treatment. So, I can’t choose any time to go to the Puskesmas. I even had to serve guests when I got a fever because of the disease. Maybe about three months and then I got better. But, it hasn’t healed completely until now.”

Furthermore, compared to the prostituted children who work in the brothels, “grey chickens” were relatively free to choose the customers they served. However, it did not mean that they could reject any customer they did not like. ‘Grey chickens’ managed by a pimp, confessed that they were often warned if they rejected their guests. For “grey chickens” who were already addicted to drugs, when their pimps knew about their addiction, the pimps usually stopped the drug supply. By doing this, the pimps could control them. Moreover, this study found that the prostituted children cannot reject the pimps’ rogue requests too often, because, no matter what, the income they earn more or less depends on the role of the pimps. For the prostituted children whose reputations were starting to fade, they usually have to succumb and compel themselves to be friendly with the pimps so as not to be left by the guests. Purry (16), one of our prostituted child informants, said:

“We know that they can be indecent. There used to be a friend here who roughly rejected the pimp’s request to sleep with him. Well, it turned out that the pimp was hostile to my friend. Yeah, finally no guests wanted to have her. Every time a visitor came it is always cancelled. To avoid loss, not to mention being scolded by the madam, we finally relented. Serve him a moment, and then it is done. If we are good, they are also good.”

It was shared that the prostituted children must accept the guest’s weird requests without having the slightest power to refuse. For the prostituted children, being abused by the guests was almost a daily experience. Our informants stated that, among the various types of requests coming from the guests, the most harrowing one was when the customers asked for anal sex. Some particular customers were sometimes not satisfied with having regular sexual intercourse. Although not all admitted to having experienced it, this study found that some informants claimed to be a customer’s sodomy victim several times. Mia (15), for example, admitted serving a guest who requested anal sex. According to her, that was a harrowing experience:

"Yes, that's my worst experience. I've only served this customer twice, and the second time he asked me to have anal sex. At first I refused. I never do it. I imagine it must be very painful. But he insisted. He threatened to report me to my madam. I am scared. At that time, I was the youngest among the others. I also recently entered here. I can only cry in pain, but I can't do nothing. But now I don't want to do that if they ask."

According to our informants, the appearances of the prostituted children, who look innocent and helpless, often made the customers become more passionate and feel able to control them. The myth that is having sex with underage children was more secure and had no risk of contracting STDs, and HIV/AIDS led to the position of these prostituted children in any brothels as the belles.

Another type of guest that usually frightened the prostituted children was those who were suffering from a sadomasochistic sexual disorder. Some prostituted children admitted that they sometimes have to serve sadomasochistic customers. A guest who suffers from sadomasochistic disorders was satisfied by having violent sex, sometimes also using specific tools to hurt these prostituted children; the more the victims moaned in pain, the more he was satisfied. Linda (17), one of the 'grey chickens' told a story of her customer who had a sadomasochistic sexual disorder. She was suspicious from the beginning because the guests who booked her did not bid much and tended to agree with whatever price she requested. At that time, she agreed to receive two million rupiahs for a short-time service in one of the hotels in Surabaya. Linda thought her guest belonged to a rich-class customer, as were the other guests she had previously served. She was aware that she had chosen the wrong guest. When she was in the room with him, he requested a harsh sexual service. He did not hesitate to slap Linda until she had bruised cheeks and bleeding gums. After the incident, Linda decided to blacklist this customer to prevent sexual abuse and violence happening in the future.

Although it must be admitted that economic factors are one of the essential driving factors for the exploitation and violence of the prostituted children, it is not the only determinant factor. From the previous studies, this present study found that, in addition to the economic factors, there are social and cultural factors that also influence the practices of exploitation and violence of the prostituted children. In this case study, it can be seen that the exploitation and violence of the prostituted children are also driven by some non-economic factors, such as the low level of education of the prostituted children, the patriarchal social structures that tend to place women merely as objects, the marginalization of women's roles in the society, the stigma toward girls who are not virgins or are late to get married, the cultural view that having sex with children will keep a person young or avoid sexual diseases, as well as the culture of incest in some parts of Indonesian society. These economic and non-economic factors intertwine and influence the practice of sexual exploitation and violence of the prostituted children in East Java, Indonesia.

This case study shows that the practice of child prostitution in East Java, Indonesia, positions the prostituted children asymmetrically as the victims of the structural conditions. The position of the prostituted children is a part of the marginalized groups as the victims of the madams, pimps, and brokers who represent the power of the capitalist. In this sense, the prostituted children are human beings who experience dehumanization because their existence is treated not much differently from the traded goods – regardless of whether their inner selves are hurt or not. In other words, prostituted children do not involve in the prostitution business because of their desires, but because of other external factors.

Moreover, while we may come to a sense that the prostituted children seem to have no power to shape their circumstances and are passive victims, with a careful reading of the finding, it can be seen that the prostituted children deploy some agency to shape their circumstances. For example, some of the 'grey chickens' in this case study reported that they blacklisted some customers for their abusive sexual behaviors. By doing this, they deliberately refused to do business with them. This quite extreme action, however, showed that the prostituted children still have the bargaining power to resist exploitation and violence. They tried hard to hold on to their little agency while living in the exploitative commercial sexual business.

Another sign of resistance and agency comes from the fact that many of the prostituted children in this study tended to behave differently when the madams were around them than when they were not. They seem to obey the rule only when the madam was around, yet found a way to break the rule when the madam was not about. In the absence of their madam, they have the guts to refuse particular consumers, pick their own preferred man, ask for more tips, or even skip the work for certain personal errands. These resistance behaviors strongly showed that the prostituted children, however limited, still have agency in exploiting and violent environments. These strategies of resistance may not be much – but they may mean a lot for the prostituted children's ability to continue to live in this prostitution business.

Conclusion

The prostitution business involving children is an illegal activity in Indonesia. However, in practice, the phenomenon of child prostitution still exists in some major cities in Indonesia. Prostituted children often experience sexual exploitation and violence that leaves not only physical marks but also mental and psychological burdens.

This study found that the various forms of exploitation and violence against prostituted children in East Java, Indonesia, included verbal, physical, economic, social, mental, and psychological violence. Some forms of this exploitation and violence are, for example, being shouted out, being scolded, being threatened (verbal), being slapped, beaten, asked to serve customers when menstruating (physical), being given low wages, asked to work for long working hours (economy), limited interaction with the family (social), and asked to do deviant sexual activities (mental and psychological). The exploitation and violence experienced by prostituted children are often worse than those of the adult prostitutes. It is because prostituted children are relatively more powerless and do not dare to resist compared to adult prostitutes.

This study also found that the economic factor often becomes the main reason for children falling into the prostitution business. Family poverty, convoluted debt, the difficulty of finding jobs, and the temptation of the high amount of wages as prostitutes have encouraged some children to get involved in this prostitution business. However, economic factors are not the only factor that encourages the involvement of children in prostitution. This study found some interesting facts that non-economic factors also play a role in encouraging children into prostitution. Some of these non-economic factors are, for example, low levels of education (education), patriarchal social structure (social), the social position of marginalized women (social), erroneous cultural views about sexual relations with children (culture), and the power of magic that still exists in specific communities in Indonesia (culture).

Although, at a glance, it might seem as if the prostituted children in this study were unable to do anything when they experienced exploitation and violence, a closer reading of the data showed that they were still able to resist, even though to a minimal degree. Some of this limited agency resistance includes blacklisting unwanted customers, pretending to be sick while menstruating, fooling the pimps with offers of sexual intercourse, obeying rules only when the madams are around them, choosing their customers, and asking for more tips. This research study shows that the exploitation and violence against prostituted children in East Java, Indonesia, is a complex phenomenon that cannot be simplified due to the economic factor. Structural pressures on the social position of the prostituted children in Indonesian society also largely determine the practice of exploitation and violence against these prostituted children.

At this point, joint and continuous efforts are needed to increase support from families, schools, religious institutions, communities, and the government to prevent the practice of child prostitution as early as possible. The family's excellent parenting skills must be the first step to prevent children from slipping into the prostitution business. Schools and social institutions in Indonesia can play an active role in raising awareness of the dangers of free sex and sexually transmitted diseases. Also, NGOs and the Indonesian government agencies must be sensitive in providing preventive and curative assistance in addressing the problem of prostituted children in Indonesia.

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