Exiting care, entering uncertainty: Transition in living arrangements after exiting institutional care among children of brothel-based sex workers in Mumbai

Reny Rajan[1]

[1]Affiliation not available

December 02, 2025

Abstract

Young people moving out of child care institutions present with complex needs for reintegration. Children of brothel-based sex workers are a marginalised subset in this group as they transition back to the vulnerability and stigma of their family being in the profession. This paper presents findings from a qualitative study on transition experiences of children of sex workers into adulthood with a focus on their living arrangements as they move out of institutions. Research used case-study methodology based on a narrative- constructivist framework. Data was collected using in-depth interviews with 20 participants. Cross case synthesis and thematic analysis of narratives reveal living arrangements broadly categorised into formal and informal settings. Findings indicate that after exiting child care institutions living arrangements fluctuate based on support systems and relationships. Exit care plan, networking and inter-agency collaborations are recommended to support mainstreaming of at-risk youths.

Key words: Care Leavers, Children of sex workers, reintegration

Introduction

Care leavers or young people exiting child protection system are now being identified as a group needing dedicated services. Leaving child protection system occurs either due to reintegration with family or attaining age 18 years. Instability in nurturing environments and educational attainments coupled with adverse childhood experiences puts them in a vulnerable situation. Although some states and child protection services offer after-care services, the continuity of care and pathways for young people exiting care services remains largely undocumented.

Children of brothel-based sex workers are rehabilitated to child care institutions (CCIs) where they complete their education and are eventually reintegrated back to society (Adhikari 2014). Compared to other children in care, children of sex workers return back to vulnerability and stigma. Research findings indicate children follow mothers trail into sex work or allied activities due to lack of educational opportunities and segregation (Alam & Hussain 2013).

This article covers findings from a larger qualitative study on identity, relationships and social support for institutionalised children of brothel-based sex workers. Research objective centred around understanding the experience of transition outside of child care institutions as they navigate through life with family, relationships, higher education and employment.

Methodology

The study used Narrativist-Constructivist framework (Shkedi 2005) in understanding the experiences of young adults as they left CCIs and mainstreamed into the society. Narrativist-Constructivist framework emphasizes context of the narrator and meaning-making processes involved in those narrations. This implied that participants' contexts and their narration were given precedence over researcher's knowledge and experience. Ethical considerations for study were reviewed and approved by Research Ethics Committee of Research Centre, College of Social Work Nirmala Niketan.

In selecting participants for the study, Yin's (2009) Replication Logic were used as the design for multiple case studies. Replication Logic entails the process of looking for similar cases (literal replication) and contrasting cases (theoretical replication) for the purpose of analysis and robustness. Replication logic ensured a diverse range of participants from gender, occupational, socio-economic backgrounds. Participants were approached through organizations and peers using snowball sampling technique. Informed consent was obtained from all participants who agreed to continue with participation. A total of 20 participants consented to participate and completed the interviews.

In-depth interviews were conducted with each participant which was supplemented by field notes by the researcher. Interviews were held in public spaces, residence and via online platforms as requested by the participants. Participants were encouraged to provide retrospective accounts of their childhood and life after exiting care. Interviews were transcribed and cross case synthesis was conducted to develop themes from findings. This article explores living arrangements after exiting care and describes them as formal and informal living arrangements with key themes on their experiences living in those arrangements.

Results

Socio-demographic profile

Mean age of participants was 25 years with a standard deviation of 6 years. Gender distribution of participants was almost equal with 11 female and 9 male participants. All participants had been through CCI – a small number of participants had been through more than 3 CCIs within 18 years of age, affecting stability and continuity of education, peer relationships and support systems.

Educational attainment

Transfers through various institutions until the age of 18 years and subsequent transfer to after-care or reintegration with family impacted educational attainment and scholastic abilities as reported by participants. Only a half of total participants had engaged in educational, vocational training or technical training after higher secondary education (classes X-XII). About 40 percent of the participants had completed graduation and 10 percent completed skill-based vocational courses.

As described by participants, continuing higher education was more of a personal choice and often accompanied by financial struggle, lack of guidance, lack of study materials, having to cover lack of fundamental knowledge in chosen field of study with help of teachers and batchmates.

Employment

Defining employment as engagement in exchange of wages did not apply to all participants. Even when there were 3 participants who were not engaged in employment, they received a fixed income from their intimate partners or other known contacts. At the time of interviews, 40 percent of participants were employed with regular wages, another 40 percent were unemployed – taking a break from work to complete studies or due to pregnancy, parenting responsibilities. About 5 percent of participants indicated that they never looked for jobs and 15 percent were occasionally employed (contract-based sex work, working for events or in showrooms etc).

Living Arrangements after exiting care

Children of sex workers rehabilitated in child care institutions-continued to meet their mothers and siblings as facilitated by the institutions. Reintegration with mothers or trusted family members was given due

importance while the child was placed in care. However, as they matured in the institution, it was common to have mothers who relocate to some other state and never came back to see them. There were also mothers who succumbed to severe health conditions like HIV-AIDS.

In a logical sequence, as children attained 18 years, it would be easy to assume that children with their mother's and family members would be reintegrated with family and those without any family would be in After-care programs. However, interviews with participants showed that living arrangements and support systems had a complex pathway.

Being released from CCIs exposed them to a plethora of challenges and opportunities – which further delayed the process of "settling down" in adulthood with other milestones like education, career, marriage etc. Emerging adulthood presented a maze of temporary standpoints before participants considered themselves settled. Broadly living arrangements after being released from CCI can be classified into:

Formal settings - Living in group homes, after-care homes, working women's hostels run by organizations. These organizations focus on skill development, employability and preparing young adults for independent living. Among the participants, about 10 of them had been through such formal settings at least once in their life. An interesting aspect is that they could have used these formal settings even after being released to care of family members. As mentioned:

"I soon realized that my sister's home was not the right place for me to stay. I thus contacted my previous NGO and got myself into a group home" (V, 22 yr old, male)

Informal settings – living with family (mother, siblings), construed family members (adults known to mother), peers, partners, living independently. At the time of interviews 40 % of the participants lived with conjugal, biological or adoptive relationships. Another 15% of the participants lived with intimate partners (with or without a marital relationship) another 15 % lived alone (independent), while remaining 30 % lived with peers.

The decision to live and continue living in a specific arrangement was cited as the consequence of life events and experiences with whom they lived. This implies that although the participants lived in a protected environment like CCI for most part of their childhood, as young adults they were able to negotiate for their spaces, wading through different systems of support.

Experiences of transitioning out of care

Cross case synthesis was conducted to develop themes to understand the experiences in transitioning. This involved comparing cases against parameters of living arrangements and looking for similar as well as different experiences and classifying them into themes. Themes are presented according to the living arrangements as below:

Living in Formal settings and the helplessness of being in care

From the interviews, about 10 participants reported having accessed formal or institutional settings in adulthood at some point in their life. Difficulty in adjusting to new life and continuing higher education, helplessness of being in care was a striking theme among participants, as they said:

"My (college) friends had access to so many things that I didn't, I had so many restrictions which I could not explain to them" (K, 25 yr old)

"It was easy to identify us in a crowd. We had the cheapest clothes on, the shabbiest bags, little or no access to phone or computers and we were expected to pay our own fees through work. Most of us started to work after 12^{th} Std and barely passed exams with minimum marks, because there was no one to guide us, no facilities to rely on after 12^{th}.." (A, 31 yr old male)

Being referred to or having to access after-care program was almost synonymous to being an orphaned/abandoned child among the participants. Yet there were also participants who actively sought this arrangement as their family members continued to be in trade. As stated by a participant,

"I really wish I was an orphan child, so that I would be supported by a reliable NGO than having to rely on my mother to support my education. (A, 20 yr old male)

Living with Family and the challenge of resocialization

Among the participants interviewed, about 11 of them were released to the care of mothers/family members just before 15 years or around the age of 18 years. Almost all the participants shared that both them and their family members were prepared about the transition. Some recall the joy of moving out of a restricted environment while others mention uncertainty. A prominent theme was resocialization and conditioning back to family and living outside institution**.** As shared by participants:

"It is one thing to meet a parent once a month while in hostel and another thing to live with her forever. It took me 2 years to understand her and to know her likes/dislikes" (M,24 yr old male)

"I did not know anything about the city. It kind of scared me even to cross the road. But I could not be like that for long." (K, 24 yr old, female)

Shouldering responsibilities and being able to contribute to their family also added to their identity formation and self esteem. As added by them,

"I loved to go for movies and parties with my friends, but soon I realized that conditions at my home were not as good as they looked. My mother needed all help that she could get. Within 3 months of moving out of hostel, I picked up work as a shop assistant, so that my younger brother could continue studies" (K, 24 yr old, female)

All experiences were not entirely positive. Some experiences of participants could be categorized into negative experiences like change of perspectives about family members. Living with family members opened them to understanding family dynamics and reflect on their perceived and actual support. As shared:

"While I was in the hostel, I was proud of my father, coming to visit us with expensive gifts for us and for every child of the hostel. But as I started living with him, I realized he only added to debts in the house and forced my mother to work (in sex trade) *against her wishes." (K, 24 yr old female)*

"One fine day, I overheard an argument between my Mom and her partner, that she even let him abuse me as a child, so that he would continue to live with her. I was being used by the same lady who was supposed to protect me" (S, 26 yr old female)

Re-integration with family members was not a welcome transition for all participants. Some participants moved out of their family due to abuse, neglect while others managed to continue to live with it.

Living with adoptive (construed) family and friends: a temporary arrangement

Adoptive or construed family members were adults from the brothel who were assigned familial relations (*maani-hui* (construed)*maama/maami/maasi* (uncle-aunt) *naani* (grandmother) etc). They fulfilled parental roles for the child in the absence of mother, as they grew up in CCI. These adoptive/construed ties stemmed out of a kinship at work and constituted their support system as children. It was found that participants actively widened their circle to include more people into this network as they matured into adulthood.

Across a life span through different hostels/settings consisting of many peers, not everyone enters this sphere of construed family. It could be a result of relationships that stood the test of time. As put by participants:

"When we got tired of living in hostels, my best friend said she could ask her brother to rent out a place, which he did. We live together as a family" (K, 25 yr old female)

"I live as a free bird, couch-surfing. Whenever, I feel I need to stay somewhere for a longer period , I have a few brothers from hostel, I know their doors wont be closed to me" (C, 23 yr old female)

Participants released to family's care also reported about offering their own house to their friends in need or during COVID crisis. This reflected an attempt to look out for their peers and an extension to "construed ties".

Whether long term or short-term situational relationships, one common theme noted across such living arrangements was that participants considered these living arrangements as temporary, until they finally settled into a house of their own.

Peer group emerged as an option for most participants, resulting in small 'groups' of youngsters living together since years of being released from CCI. Guided by seniors from the same hostel, these peers learn about renting, purchasing household items, travel through the city and other independent life skills.

Living Alone and settling independently

Among the participants, three were living independently in rented houses and sustaining themselves with earnings or savings. About 25 percent of the remaining participants upheld moving into one's own apartment/home as a life-goal. The circumstances that led to this independence could be gradual or as a consequence of situational crisis.

"I was content living in a group home until all of us were thrown out because the housing society complained to affiliated NGO that my friends got their boyfriends to the same flat. I found this house with the help of my employer" (T, 23 yr old, female)

"When you live with friends there's no privacy, your life is dependant on others. Now I am free and on my own" (A, 31 yr old male)

It is important to note that the decision of living independently was not always consequential to living with family or friends. A person could choose to move back to live with family or friends or any other living arrangement depending on life situations. As highlighted:

"I was cast out of a group home because I turned into drugs... I wanted to show the world that I didn't need anyone. However, I could not manage all the expenses by myself. I had to move in to live with my brother, despite all the disagreements between us." (R, 25 yr old female)

As reiterated through multiple themes, a care-leaver's transition through all these formal and inform living arrangements was fluid and depending on life circumstances. The only consistent element was a determination to survive.

Discussion

There is a dearth of literature addressing concerns of young persons leaving child protection systems and within that subset, hardly any studies have managed to address children of commercial sex workers leaving child care. Discussion of findings therefore draws from literature about young persons from vulnerable backgrounds and emerging adulthood in India.

Findings of the study concur with Seiter (2009), Mitra and Arnett (2021) which highlighted that shouldering familial responsibility is characteristic in emerging adulthood in India. Majority of the participants who lived with family members or in other settings still continued to support their family members. Further, Bhargava, Chandrasekar, Kansal and Modi (2018) emphasized about after-care services being crucial in shaping quality of life for young people leaving care. It pointed out a disparity in indicators like education, employment, relationships and stability among young people depending on the presence of after-care services. The study findings are also similar to Dutta (2017) that pointed out access to higher education, jobs and stability in accommodation as major issues of young women transiting out of child care in India.

The study highlights alternative living arrangements that young care leavers depend upon as they reintegrate back to society as adults. It sheds light on the fact that no single arrangement is permanent and fully equipped to address their emerging needs. However, despite the odds some young adults are able to negotiate with

these spaces to achieve best outcomes for them. In some cases, survival involved engaging in sex work or related aspects of trade, reflecting the resilience required to navigate such constrained circumstances.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Reforms in child protection policies have ensured safe childhood for children of sex workers until the age of 18 years, however, the life after care remains to be complex. Among care leavers, children of sex workers in institutional care, represent a subset with specific needs. While other care leavers can start afresh, children of sex workers have a parent or loved ones still in the trade and/or frequently associate themselves with the stigma of being involved in trade. Intersectionality of determinants like education, gender, access to support systems make reintegration and independent living a much more complex process.

Findings of the study calls for service organizations to reflect on reintegration and continuity of care with a focus on community-based rehabilitation as young people exit child protection services. Exit care plans, linkage with networks of care-leavers and follow up post rehabilitation are some of the best practices that can have a positive impact on young adults leaving care. Existing policy limitations and poor recognition of youth development make care-leavers are reduced to a revolving door where they seek the same services as children and later as adults. As young care leavers attempt to de-institutionalise themselves it is important for stakeholders like education, health, service organisations working for child and youth well-being to liaison their services.

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Note:

Author is currently working as a Mental Health Clinician with Local health district in Australia.