Original Research Article

Peer relationships and Bullying experiences in children of sex workers

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ABSTRACT

Peer relationships are an important part in children's lives and it has bearing effect on their development. Peer relationships serve as an important source of emotional security outside the family along with providing stimulation for skill acquisition and learning. Bullying is defined as actions or behaviours that are negative, having a hostile intent, repeated over a long time and involving a power differential. Bullying is found to occur in various social contexts such as in friendship dyads, peer groups, playgrounds or the school environment. Children of sex workers are marginalized because of their mother's profession and live in under privileged conditions. Peers are often the only stable social interaction these children have which provides social and emotional support, due to their mother's erratic working hours and inability to provide adequate parenting. The current study explores peer relationships and bullying experiences in children of sex workers. The data collection was done through interviewing 57 children of sex workers of both genders aged between 12-18 years. The interviews were analysed qualitatively through content analysis. The results showed that these children spend majority of their time with their peers and develop strong bonds with them. Breakage or rupture in these relationships are usually overwhelming and affects them tremendously. Bullying was found to occur among peers in the form of excessive teasing, spreading rumours and showing authority.

Key words: children of sex workers, peers, peer relationships, bullying.

INTRODUCTION

Peer relationships are a pivotal part of children's lives and have bearing effect on their development. Children come to about themselves through peer interaction on the basis of how they are treated in their company, peer relationships provide great opportunity to learn the value of cooperation, how to gain support and/or help and develop interpersonal skills.

Bukowski [1] found that friendships serve two functions: providing stimulation for skill-acquisition and learning; and to shape behavior according to cultural norms around them. Further, functions of friendship also keep changing along with development, such as serving as a means for achieving mutual enjoyment, entertainment or fun through coordinated or cooperative play and sharing positive affect in the early years of childhood, to achievement of group identity and acceptance inmiddle childhood, finally achieving a coherent individual identity and self-understanding of oneself in adolescence [2].

Sullivan [3] suggested in late childhood and pre-adolescence, most children form chumships with a single, favoured peer. In addition to providing companionship with this favored peer, Sullivan argued that close,

mutual friendships could: promote the development of interpersonal skills, including sensitivity to others' thoughts and feelings and concern for another's well-being; provide validation of the child's developing self-concept and promote self-esteem. Friendships also serve as an important source of emotional security outside the family. Friends most often appear to cushion children in perhaps unique ways from some of the stresses they experience, including those in the family [4].

Making and keeping friends requires a variety of socio-emotional and social-cognitive skills, including perspective-taking ability, affect recognition, communicative skills, self-regulation, understanding of intentions, desires, and beliefs in others, social information processing skills and social problem solving strategies, among others. These competencies develop over childhood, and friendship characteristics and expectations change in concert [5].

Bullying may be defined as actions or behaviours that are negative, having a hostile intent, repeated over a long time and involving a power differential. It might involve more than one perpetrator or recipient [6]. Bullying could be done either overtly or in an indirect way, for example, bullying could manifest such as teasing, spreading gossip, spreading rumours, social manipulation or social comparison [7].

Bullying occurs in various social contexts, it could happen in peer/friendship dyads, peer groups, playgrounds or the school environment. According to Bandura [8] children are likely to get influenced to imitate behaviour if the models meet three conditions: the model is a powerful figure, the model gets rewarded rather than punished for his/her behaviour and the model shares similar characteristics with the group. Peers who are present during a bullying episode have the opportunity to observe a powerful model indulging in it and most often likely to get away with it. Hence, this is likely to influence the peers to involve themselves in bullying rather than stopping it. Children who are made aware of different forms of bullying and its effects on the recipient are likely to intervene to stop it [9]. Thus one of the way to stop or reduce bullying is through building awareness about it.

Sex work, is considered one of the world's oldest profession. The profession is still carried out across various parts of the world, but the legal status varies from country to country, from being permissible, regulated or to a punishable crime. Individuals who practice sex work are known as 'sex workers' i.e. a person who engages in sexual activity in return for financial or security benefits. It is a complex form of social system in terms of morality, ethics, pattern of gender and economic inequalityto form a multidimensional, multi-layered institution [10].

Adhikari [11] did a survey in Bowbazar of Kolkata and found that about 1557 female sex workers had their own or adopted children. Due to the very nature of the profession, where the working hours is usually in the evening or in the night, mothers usually will not get any time to parent their children. Further, in the absence of father or any other care giver, these children are left to their own and often found among their peers in the same locality either playing or loitering around without any purpose. Due to this reason, peer groups are the only stable social interaction these children have access to and are likely to derive emotional or social support from them. In addition, due to the apparent lack of supervision there are high chances for these children to have experiences of bullying. Hence the current study explored the type of peer relationships, quality of peer relationship and instances of bullying among peers in children of sex workers

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research design of the study was explorative design. The sample size was 57 children of sex workers of both the genders aged between 12-18 years through purposive sampling method. NGOs working for the welfare of children of sex workers in Pune and Delhi were contacted and after obtaining there permission to collect data the children were approached.

Semi-structured interview guide used in the study was developed based on available literature and was given to 15 mental health professionals, who are experts in this field, for content validation. The changes and suggestions given by the experts were incorporated. The content of the semi structured interview schedule focused on the types of friends, quality of the friendships, experiences of bullying and feeling of loneliness.

The study was reviewed and approved by the ethics committee of National Institute of Mental Health and Neurosciences, Bengaluru, India. Children those who were able to speak either in English or Hindi fluently were selected. Written informed assent was taken individually for each child and the written informed consent was obtained from the guardians. The children were also explained that they could withdraw from the study at any time; confidentiality will be maintained and they were informed about limits regarding confidentiality. During the process of data collection, no identification details of the children were noted down to maintain anonymity. Each child was interviewed separately with the semi structured interview guide.

The responses were written down in verbatim as the permission to audio record was not given by the guardians/NGOs. Content analysis was chosen as the method for analysis of the interview responses. The responses were coded, then categorized and themes were generated. Descriptive statistics was done for the socio-demographics details of the participants.

RESULTS

The total numbers of participants were 57 children of sex workers, where 18 of them were boys and 39 of them were girls. Their age ranged from 12-18 years with an average of 13 years. Their education was found to be between 3-12th grade with an average of 7th grade education (Table 1).

Table 1 – Showing the descriptive statistics in terms of gender, age and education level

N	Gender		Age (Yrs)		Education (Grade)	
			Mean (SD)	range	Mean (SD)	range
57	Boys	Girls	13.9 (2.0)	12- 18	7.4 (2.7)	3- 12
	18	39				

Peer relationships
The board category of peer relationship was divided into sub categories such as- friendship, quality of friendship, experiences of bullying and feeling of loneliness.
The sub category of friendship was further divided into sub themes: such as type of friend, location of friend, duration of friendships and activities done with friends.

The children had various types of friends whom they classified as "*good friends*", "*just friends*" and "*best friends*". They had friendship groups both at their school and at the shelter home.
"*I have friends at school and here at the hostel*"

The children reported that the duration of friendship depended on various factors; some were close friends since the beginning as they were together in the shelter home and others just drifted apart. "*I have had close friends since long time; some have remained close friends whereas others have just stopped talking as they became friends with others*".

Whereas few reported that some of them broke up with their friends because they had a fight or broke their trust by sharing their secret to others.
"*I stopped being friends with her because we had a fight because she told everyone a secret which I had just told her. So I did not speak to her as she broke my trust*".

The activities they engaged usually were sitting together in class or spending free time such physical education in school together. Further, children who had friends at the shelter homes spend time doing chores together, studying, completing homework and sleep next to each other.

The sub category of quality of friendship was further divided into sub themes such as: ability to confide, share feelings or experiences, bond based on trust and also not being trustworthy.

The children expressed that they could share their feelings and/or experiences with their closest or best friends and trust them.

"I share everything with my friend and she also shares her stuff with me. I tell her things what makes me sad or happy. Yes we share our feelings also; why because I trust her".

Whereas a few of them expressed that even though they had good friends, they felt apprehensive in sharing their secrets because they were concerned that it might not remain a secret and spread to others.

"Before I used to share things but now I don't, as that person might share the things I tell her; it has happened before, so now I don't share".

Bullying experiences

The sub category was further divided into sub themes such as: perpetrator, method of being bullied, experience of being bullied and their reaction to it.

The children expressed that most of the time they were teased or called offensive names and also the younger children were shown excessive authority by the older children. Most of them reported that the bullying experiences made them sad, humiliated and angry.

"Some of the older children tease me so much and call me 'Hoolu' (Owl) every time and in front of others. It makes me feel sad and I get upset".

Children reported that they usually retorted back by teasing them back or calling offensive names or hitting them back. Few of them reported that they would just let go and do nothing about it.

"I teased them or scold them using bad words; once I hit one of them so that they would stop it"

Some children reported that they tease other children, call names and have shown their authority sometimes if it is a younger child. They reported that teasing and calling names is common in their environment.

"Yes I tease others or call them names, everyone does it here; I am a leader I have to yell at them so they do their work; I don't feel bad, as I said everyone does it".

A few reported that if they feel it is excessive, they go and apologize or made to apologize by the warden following a complaint.

"I say sorry if I feel that I have teased them more or when they complain to the warden".

The sub category of feeling of loneliness was further divided into sub themes such as: causes of loneliness, emotions felt in reaction to it and what they did to overcome it. The children reported that they were made to feel lonely when they had a fight with their close friend or their trust was broken in friendship. They expressed that the loneliness made them feel sad, dejected, hopeless, scared and miss their mothers.

"Whenever I have a fight with my friend, I feel lonely. Then I feel so sad and miss my mother"

Usually during this period they reported that they would avoid speaking to people, not feel like having food or not do any work, so they could get over it.

"During this time I don't talk to anyone, sometimes I don't feel like having food or do any work; well I get better after sometime".

DISCUSSION

The current study explored peer relationships, quality of peer relationship and bullying experiences of the children of sex workers. The children who recede in the red light areas are found to stay in overcrowded narrow dirty lanes, within very small houses without proper sanitary or drainage facilities. Due their

mother's profession, which involves erratic working hours, these children do not get adequate or required supervision and care from their mothers. Children are often found on the streets playing with other children, running errands, interacting and soliciting customers to visit the area who are often abusive and insensitive towards them.

Since a decade, non-government organisations (NGOs) have been set up in these areas which provide day care facilities or shelter homes to these children along with access to education. The NGO shelter homes and the school are the places where these children get to develop peer relationships. A relationship with their peers becomes their only social support in the NGO shelters, as they are relatively cut off from the outside influence of the society around them and hence lack adult interactions either with their mothers who are usually busy with their trade or other adults. The NGO shelter homes are under-staffed where a caretaker is in-charge of about 20-30 children alone. Hence this might contribute and facilitate towards developing good peer relationships.

The children in the interviews have expressed that they sometimes consider their friends as providing both emotional and social support, as they are deprived of having constant support from adults in their family. These children are involved in assisting most of the activities in the NGOs such as cleaning, gardening, filling water and cooking. Thus they tend to spend majority of the time with their peers. Further they have also expressed that any breakage or rupture in their relationship with their peers affects them tremendously. During the breakage or rupture period, they are overwhelmed with the feeling of loneliness, and report that they feel all alone and scared as they have no one to depend upon.

Craig and Pepler [12] found that when bullying occurs in presence of peers, they tend to reinforce it through providing attention. Bullying occurs in various social contexts such as peer dyads, peer groups, at the playground or the school [13]. The children reported that bullying occurred usually through excessive teasing or calling offensive names which are shameful and humiliating, as they are done in presence of others.In places where there were only girls with different age groups, prevalence of bullying was found to be more. Whereas, in places that sheltered boys and girls, the instances of bullying was found to be less. Further, boys reported less of teasing experience compared to girls. They also reported that they likely to 'shrug off' being teased easily compared to girls. The older children, by default of their age are made leaders, who often found to behave in an authoritarian way. The children expressed that bullying was a sort of a norm in their environment; usually done by the older children and they could not do anything to stop it.

Peers were found to be more respectful and align with bullies when they unveiled more authority and this was likely to prolong bullying behaviour [12]. Even their guardians seem oblivious to these things and do not take steps to prevent or create awareness about it. Older children who indulged in bullying usually in the form of teasing or calling offensive names, reported that it was sort of norm and everyone experience it or do it.

Limitations

The limitation of the current study was that only the children of sex workers who were residing in NGOs were interviewed and the study was carried out only in two cities and the sample consisted more girls compared to boys. Further, bullying experiences which might occur in other contexts other than peer relationships was not explored. The results would have been compared to other sample who resided in hostels and/or shelter homes.

Implications

The study shows that the peer relationships play an important role in children of sex workers, more so for these children that their mother's being unavailable for sufficient amount to provide social and emotional support. The NGOs are found to be doing a good service and they provide good platform for these children to develop healthy peer relationships. This form of model or system is found to provide a good support system for these children and this can be replicated for children living in similar circumstances.

Even though bullying is considered a norm among these children, there is a need to address them to reduce the instances by creating awareness among them.

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