

Chinese Women in Commercial Sexual Activity in Auckland and Manukau

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Abstract

This study compares a small group of Chinese women involved in commercial sexual activity with a group of New Zealand born women were involved in commercial sexual activity. The data collected is small due to the restrictions in gaining access to the women in brothels. No Chinese women in this sample worked independently or on the streets. This evaluation explores the following issues: the age of initial involvement, childhood victimisation, sexual assault, alternative employment, and the use of drugs and alcohol.

Introduction

Prior to 2004 all studies of sex workers in New Zealand were carried out in the South Island (Plumridge & Abel, 2001). The one exception is the qualitative study of six transgender workers in Auckland (Worth, 2000). A large Christchurch study found 12 participants under the age of 18. All but one were working on the streets (Plumridge & Abel, 2001). Thirty-one percent of the total sample of these sex workers became involved in prostitution when they were under the age of 18 years. There were no Chinese women in the South Island study.

One New Zealand study of 29 sex workers from Dunedin found that those involved in commercial sexual activity were more likely to have had difficult early developmental experiences with more interpersonal challenges and more penetrative sexual abuse as children than a comparable community sample of women of similar age (Potter, Martin & Romans, 1999). The sex workers were more likely to have left home early, to have left school early, had lower qualifications and to have had an earlier pregnancy than women who were not involved in the sex trade. While this does not indicate a causal effect, the author suggests there may be some linkage.

An Australian national inquiry into commercial sexual activity found the main reasons for engaging in the sex trade was to obtain drugs, accommodation, money and food. Other reasons cited were fear of violence, peer pressure and poor judgement (Grant, Gabosky & David 1999; Martyn, 1998). Some young people also mentioned emotional contact and said that commercial sexual activity was a “tool for companionship” (Martyn, 1998). The influence of peer pressure is well documented for teenagers but it may be stronger for adolescent street youth (Unger, Simon, Newman, Montgomery, Kipke, & Albornoz, 1998). Peer pressure has also been associated with delinquent peer glory (Vitaro, Tremblay, Kerr, Pagani & Bukowski, 1997).

In an address to the United Nations, New Zealand recognised that two groups of children were particularly vulnerable to commercial sexual exploitation. These are children in lower socio-economic groups and children of indigenous people (Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2001). This was supported by a 40% representation of Maori in an ECPAT study of 47 sex workers who had begun commercial sexual activity under the age of 18 years (Saphira & Herbert, 2004). Maori population in the New Zealand Census for 2001 for the northern North Island was 21% (NZ Census 2001). This study reported a high consumption of alcohol and frequent drug taking among the respondents. Fifty-six percent reported childhood sexual abuse and 79% were living away from their parents when they became involved in commercial sexual activity.

The ECPAT NZ researcher found 13 Asian brothels in the Auckland and Manukau regions. It was difficult to obtain responses from women of Chinese ethnicity as the questionnaire was in English. Funding from local government enabled a translator to be employed to accompany the researcher to revisit brothels which were predominately Chinese. This study compares the first involvement in commercial sexual activity of non-NZ born Chinese women with that of New Zealand sex workers from a previous study.

Method

The questionnaire used in the previous study (Saphira & Herbert 2004), which had been approved by the Auckland Ethics Committee, was translated into Mandarin Chinese. It was taken to Chinese brothels in the Counties Manukau and Auckland Central regions. In addition telephone contact was made with people advertising massage in the four Chinese free newspapers to arrange interviews. Most of the telephone numbers belonged to the Asian brothels. There were few independent operators. Several brothels in Manukau, New Lynn, Panmure and Auckland Central which had an owner in attendance, refused to allow us to talk to the women. Most of these brothels had regular advertisements offering work for women. The researcher placed several advertisements in the Chinese free weekly newspapers; - *Mandarin Times*, *New Times Weekly* and the *International Students Press*. The advertisement requested people who had received money for sex to assist the researcher. Two women responded but failed to return the questionnaire. No one phoned the Chinese interpreter whose cell phone number was also on the advertisement.

The nine women who responded to the questionnaire in the course of visits to brothels worked in Panmure or Auckland Central. Two other Chinese sex workers spoke at length about the main groups of Chinese women involved in prostitution in Auckland. Their responses are compared with the non-Asian group of 52 New Zealand born and 3 European born immigrants sex workers that have been interviewed in a study of underage prostitution. This group is referred to as the NZ group as the European immigrants born overseas came out to New Zealand when they were young.

Results

The eight Chinese women were literate and wrote their responses in Mandarin Chinese and one Thai women who replied in English.

Half of the women had been involved in commercial sexual activity in China and in Singapore before they came to New Zealand. All stated that they used condoms every time. They were all over 18 years old before they engaged in sex for money.

The average age when consenting sex began was much older for the Chinese women than the NZ group see Table I.

Table I Ethnicity and Age of First Consenting Sexual Experience

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Average Age</i>	<i>Numbers</i>
Pakeha	14.2	23
Maori	13.22	22
Pacific	14.7	7
Migrant	14.00	3
Asian	21.30	9
Total	15.50	64

A quarter of the Chinese women disclosed childhood sexual abuse compared with over half (56%) of the NZ respondents (56%). This is similar to the New Zealand prevalence study range of

between 15% and 30% (Anderson, Martin, Mullins & Romans, 1993) and the Youth 2000 rate of between 24% and 31% (Adolescent Health Research Group, 2003).

There were ethnic differences in the rate of disclosure. In the NZ group two out of the three (66%) of European immigrants disclosed sexual abuse as a child compared with 40% Pakeha, and 60% Pacific People, 74% of Maori see Table II. The NZ group had higher rates of disclosure.

The age at which the Chinese respondents began to receive payment for a sexual activity ranged from 19 to 25 years with an average age of 24.5 years. The NZ group ranged from under 12 years to 17 years with an average of 14.5 years.

Three out of the eight Chinese women (37%) had had very little sexual experience before being engaged in sex for payment. This compares to 52% of the NZ group.

All but one of the Chinese women said they always used condoms when they first had sex for money compared with half the NZ group. About a fifth of the NZ group used condoms occasionally or less. Condoms were used less frequently when a pimp or client set the price.

Table II Ethnicity and Childhood Sexual Abuse

<i>Ethnicity</i>	<i>Childhood Sexual Abuse</i>		Total	% Disclosed
	No Disclosure	Disclosed Abuse		
Pakeha	15	8	23	35%
Maori	6	16	22	73%
Pacific	2	5	7	72%
Migrant	1	2	3	66%
Chinese	7	2	9	22%
Total	31	33	64	

Almost half the NZ group said a female friend or an older female suggested their involvement in underage commercial sexual activity. The Chinese women were older when they began and most had thought of engaging in commercial sex themselves or had responded to a newspaper advertisement. One had the idea suggested to her boyfriend. The price for sexual acts in the NZ group had been set by the client, pimp, parlour, gang or older woman in over a half of instances (56%). For the Chinese women the price was set by the parlour or pimp in all but one instance. Although the Chinese women were older when they began sex for payment, they did not appear to have any more control in setting the price.

All the Chinese women began in parlours or their own home. In the NZ group the first act of sex for payment occurred in a variety of situations, - in cars, parks, on the street or in motels, parlours or rooms. Nearly twice as many Europeans (59%) were initiated in their first act indoors in parlours, or escort motels, compared to Maori (29%).

Most of the Chinese respondents described their first client as a business man who was usually older than themselves. Over half the NZ group reported that their first client was considerably older than themselves. Few reported any teenagers among their subsequent clients and clients continued to reflect an age difference.

A major difference between the NZ group and the Chinese respondents was the use of alcohol and drugs see Table III. In Table III those surveyed who began sex work after the age of 17 years have been included. The Chinese women did not use either substance while two thirds of the NZ group drank to excess and used illicit substances on a regular basis.

Always being sober did not prevent sexual assaults. Half the Chinese women were attacked compared to almost three-quarters (71%) of the NZ group. There were fewer visible signs of traumatisation (impulsiveness, scattered thinking, inability to plan ahead, wavery voice and discontinued sentences) among the Chinese workers compared to those interviewed in the previous study. A visibly bruised Chinese in one brothel was still in shock after an attack the previous night.

Table III Ethnicity and Alcohol Use in Commercial Sexual Activity

<i>Ethnic</i>	<i>Excess Consumed</i>	<i>Occasional</i>	<i>Seldom</i>	<i>No Alcohol</i>	<i>Total</i>
Pakeha	11	5	4	3	23
Maori	18	1	3	1	22
Chinese & Thai		1		9	10
Pacific	2	2	2	1	7
New Immigrant	1	1	1		3
Total	32	10	10	14	66

All the Chinese respondents and 80% of the NZ respondents had tried to stop having sex for money. Money was the main reason the respondents returned to commercial sexual activity after they had tried to stop. The financial incentive was the same across all ethnicities.

All the Chinese respondents and over half of the NZ respondents advised young people who might be thinking about having sex for money not to do it and to check out other options. A third of the NZ group suggested that the young person needed to get themselves educated about the dangers of being engaged in commercial sexual activity. Three respondents suggested the young person get counselling before they considered entering the sex trade. The Chinese respondents, all of whom were still involved in commercial sexual activity, gave no encouragement to young people to become involved.

Student Involvement

Two of the Chinese women who managed brothels talked about students coming to work for a short period of time. Some of these young women were as young as seventeen but most were eighteen years or older. Money was always the reason for doing this. Some of these students came from families who were not wealthy and who may have borrowed money to enable their child to come to New Zealand to study. This meant the students had to get a part time job to support themselves. Commercial sexual activity was a quick way to earn money. Some students from wealthy families came with considerable money but had lost it gambling and needed money to pay their fees, petrol and living expenses. Some instances were cited of girls who had never had sex being able to sell themselves for a large sum of money. Figures of over \$10,000 and even over \$20,000 were suggested as it was considered very good luck to have sex with a virgin. One ECPAT worker had met two such students at school but neither wanted to fill out the questionnaire as they felt too ashamed.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is not possible to generalise from the small sample of Chinese women involved in commercial sexual activity in this study. It is possible that younger women may have been involved in those brothels that would not allow us to interview the women. There were anecdotal reports about students as young as seventeen being involved. This was mostly short-term involvement to pay back debt but we were unable to interview anyone who had done this. In comparison to the NZ group the Chinese respondents were older when they became involved in commercial sexual activity, all worked in parlours, disclosed less sexual abuse as children, appeared less traumatised and did not use alcohol or drugs.

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