



Implementation of policies to protect under-age prostitute ladies: A business or sexual ‘sharecropping’ in Bukavu, Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo

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Abstract

Prostitution and exploitation of under-age ladies are becoming more prevalent in Bukavu, in the Eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. The school dropout, the death of parents, and the lack of basic needs are some of the factors that explain this situation. Regarding this situation, under-age ladies are engaged in prostitution to survive with potential risks to their mental and physical health. The involvement of professionals is important in the reinforcement of preventive and curative measures for these under-age ladies. The implementation of social policies adapted to the urban reality, the involvement of political and administrative authorities and non-government organisations (NGOs) working in the field of mental and physical health of under-age ladies based on the cultural values is needed for the restoration of autonomy of these under-age ladies in such post-conflict context.

Key words

prostitution, business, sexual sharecropping, under-age ladies and social workers, Democratic Republic of Congo

Key points

1. This article examines under-age prostitutes as vulnerable groups by using African research methodology.
2. The study examines the difficulties that under-age prostitutes should overcome, and the coping mechanisms.
3. Social, environmental, and Ubuntu principles are all important while addressing under-age prostitution.
4. Research findings could be used to create a social policy that is favorable to under-age prostitutes and to organise an effective social intervention.

Introduction

Prostitution and exploitation of women are becoming more common and growing in the world (Mvuezolo, 2009). Some figures underline the magnitude of the phenomenon. Between 40 and 42 million people are involved in prostitution in the world, and 75% of them are between 13 and 25 years old, with almost 80% of them being women or under-age ladies (Schulze et al., 2014), and their income can be estimated at the value of \$186 billion per year in the world (Schulze et al., 2014; Pauro, 2014). Contemporary international law understands the issue of prostitution in the world from the perspective of combating violence against women (FIDH, 2000). It remains a complex public health problem in which society has a role to play in multiple consequences (Lanctôt et al., 2016). Among youth, there is a social problem that has inspired an unprecedented amount of research in Africa and is highly vulnerable to health and social problems (Moore et al., 2014). African prostitutes have mainly been excluded from the worldwide discussion on sex workers' rights, even though the global sex workers' rights movement has only been around for 40 years (Mgbako & Smith, 2011). Some countries have legalized prostitution as a profession, while other countries remain unwilling (Lavallée, 2003). While prostitution and exploitation have always been known in various societies, there is much more discretion surrounding the prostitution of under-age ladies than adults.

A significant number of public health and social science studies from sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate how transactional sex differs from prostitution (Mwapu et al., 2016; Hunter, 2002). A significant number of public health and social science studies from sub-Saharan Africa demonstrate how transactional sex differs from prostitution (Mwapu et al., 2016; Hunter, 2002). "Prostitution" involves predetermined forms of remuneration for those who provide sex in a professional capacity (Mwapu et al., 2016). As a result of poverty, prostitution and the exploitation of under-age girls are on the rise in Africa (Bambara, 2012). In Africa, often described as conservative, prostituted women are considered in reality as having negative behavior in African tradition (Laditan, 2001), and seem to be taboo in some African cultures (Mvuezolo, 2009). Women's education levels are lower than men's in the DRC, the percentage of women who can read and write is decreasing rapidly from 90% to 60%, and women and under-age ladies are exposed to risks that make them more vulnerable at the same time (Wabern, 2016). For reasons of survival (Radio Okapi, 2013), many young Congolese under-age ladies are engaged in prostitution. In conflict zones, particularly in Eastern DR Congo, and in Bukavu Town, prostitution is becoming more and more widespread. The promotion of women's rights in DR Congo remains a concern following the proliferation of under-age ladies' prostitution ladies in large towns. This situation is justified by the repeated wars experienced in the DRC. Because of poverty, women in Eastern DR Congo are often exploited by adults for their selfish interests. These women, who live in particularly difficult conditions, are sometimes the ones who are sexually exploited. Bukavu Town has not been released from the other towns of the DRC where under-age ladies cross risks related to prostitution. They leave their families and live in bars and nightclubs to afford their primary needs.

In South Kivu, the social reality is complex, especially regarding the high rate of poverty. Recently, educators in collaboration with the media in Bukavu decided to look at their daily reality (Radio Okapi, 2013). In Bukavu, the prostitution of teenagers is becoming more and

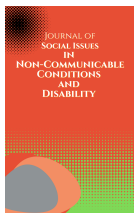
more common in various places. Young people of 18 years and sometimes under 18 years are sexually exploited. These under-age ladies are exposed to themselves, especially in the evening, in the bars, bistros, and night clubs (Mulume, 2017). Nowadays, in Muhanzi Beach, there is a growing number of under-age ladies who are engaged in prostitution. Days and nights, they are in the bars under-age ladies looking for sexual partners to fulfill their financial desires in defiance of moral principles and legal health regulations. This article examines the practices of young prostitutes in the urban environment by questioning the lucrative nature of these young ladies, profiles, explanatory factors, the process of initiation of under-age ladies into prostitution, their mode of payment, and allocation of their financial resources, as well as the difficulties encountered by young lady prostitutes in Bukavu Town.

Theoretical framework and methodological approach

Ubuntu social work, welfare, and development theory

Africans use a set of principles known Ubuntu as a frame of reference. Although these beliefs and customs differ depending on the ethnic groupings in each nation, they all share a foundation. This theory is predicated on the notion that men belong to a deeper world of connections and values. The emphasis is on the bigger and more significant relational, community, societal, environmental, and spiritual worlds, as stated by Mugumbate et al. (2020). Ubuntu is found in many African countries, though it is known by different names, such as “bomoto” or “bantu” in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Mugumbate and Chereni, 2020). Young girls who are engaged in prostitution may be contributing to their problem. In the context of the prostitution issue, the negligent enforcement of some social, environmental, and spiritual norms may have contributed to the involvement of young girls in prostitution. To overcome these obstacles and combat the prostitution of young girls, intervention techniques must be established following the standards set by the community and involve the family, the kids, and the community heavily in the prevention process. Ubuntu thus becomes a crucial concept in the post-conflict setting of the social work profession in Bukavu, Eastern DRC, as there is a multiplicity of cultures that are fundamentally founded on respect for human dignity and solidarity. As a result, Ubuntu, an African humanist worldview, has had a renaissance as a native strategy for conflict resolution and peacebuilding resulting in peace and security (Adeoye & Okeke, 2017). In the context of a so-called fragile state like the DRC, where the number of sexual violence victims keeps rising, it is necessary to step up community and family sensitization efforts based on ideals like “Kusaidihana,” a Kiswahili term used in the eastern part of the DRC that denotes a philosophy of mutuality. Because the community is aware of the values, preventive measures will have a great impact in this situation of a prostitute emergency, and curative efforts will be successful.

However, social workers and the government would significantly reduce the prostitution of young girls and promote peace if they followed the principles and ideals of Ubuntu in their public policies. Adeoye and Okeke (2017) demonstrate how the adoption of an Ubuntu mindset can result in the empowerment of those who are struggling. From the standpoint of a comprehensive vision of preventive and curative approaches, concepts like “Ukama” (relationality) and “ujamaa” (collaboration) should be operationalized in the many social



intervention activities with young girls involved in prostitution. Therefore, by concentrating on family, community, the environment, and spirituality, social workers and development professionals can build rather than weaken families, communities, society, the environment, and spirituality (Khupe & Keane, 2017).

Numerous other tenets of Ubuntu, including internal goodness, empathy, reciprocity, respect for others, dignity, harmony, and humanity, are pertinent to preventative and therapeutic methods (Kasherwa et al., 2022). According to this view, the involvement of young girls in prostitution explains both the weakening of these girls and the lack of response from their families and communities. As noted by Magezi & Khlopa (2021), hospitality must be demonstrated because it is an essential component of African culture. The Ubuntu notion is now being used in social work (Mugumbate et al., 2020; Kurevakwesu & Maushe, 2020). In the Democratic Republic of the Congo, adolescent prostitution is banned, and many cultures view it as dangerous deportation of young girls.

Methodological approach

The target population is made up of under-age prostitute ladies working in Bukavu Town. However, this study used non-probability and occasional sampling. It is also exhaustive because we have resorted to the under-age ladies working in the bistros, bars, and nightclubs located in the different corners of Bukavu. Interviews were conducted to have an idea about prostitute's lives, especially for under-age ladies for further research and recommendations. Therefore, 10 cases of under-age ladies were interviewed from the three communes, respectively four from Ibanda, three from Bagira, and three from Kadutu. The following criteria have been set: participants should have at least 15 to 25 years old, be recognized as a prostitute, to live in one of the three communes of Bukavu Town. Thus, the documentary technique allowed to consult some written documents, and websites to get information concerning the present study. In addition, the Snowball technique allowed to collect information from these under-age ladies. In the process of collecting information, we privileged Kiswahili in the search for consent and data collection. To this end, consent was non-verbal as prostitutes alike are generally concerned about the written word as they may be afraid of being arrested. In the interviews, we tried to decolonise the interviews. According to Chilisa (2019), this method is more collective and different from the western style of interviewing which is more individualistic. In our case, it was more a question of favouring free exchanges where the interviewees were free to express themselves without restraint. It was the opinions of our interviewees that counted. Thus, in the conduct of the interviews, we started by establishing a climate of trust between the interviewees. The dialogue approach was favoured. To analyse data, we chose content analysis because it is a systematic and objective descriptive analysis technique that allows us to classify and interpret the key elements of the analysed texts as this pilot study is qualitative. Similarly, the primary analysis in situ (during data collection) and thematic analysis facilitated our understanding of this phenomenon. However, in the discussion of the results, we proceeded to link the collected data to the existing literature. The proposals included in this article will be part of action research logic, i.e. these results could be used to develop intervention programmes and to serve as a framework for the implementation of a

social policy in the context of young girls in prostitution in the DRC in general and in Bukavu in particular.

Results

The results are broken down according to the study objectives and presented using the qualitative method.

Profiles of young prostitutes

The under-age ladies involved in prostitution in this study were identified as being between 17 and 25 years old. Most of these under-age ladies have incomplete secondary education. Those who have reached university represent fewer of the young ladies in prostitution. This reality about school education indicates that there is a strong correlation between school education and prostitution among under-age ladies. The majority of them are single even if some have already one child. Interviews with these under-age ladies also show that few of them have both parents. These young women, although orphans have their responsibilities, some have children that they support and others take care of their little brother or sister. It is also worth mentioning that the majority of these under-age ladies live in their prostitution environment, either in the nightclub or in other small houses.

My family rejected me after being aware that I was a prostitute, after the service I am obliged to spend the night in the nightclub if I don't have a client.

From this citation, we observe that many families do not view prostitution as a profession but rather as social deviance. The status of poverty for the families does not give the privilege to these young ladies to make prostitution. The community remains insensitive to this reality, although some are encouraged by one of their parents, the proportion remains very low. We find that some of the under-age ladies practicing this profession come from the suburbs of the city and a significant number of under-age ladies from Rwanda and Burundi are observed in Bukavu Town. In the former periods, prostitutes were primarily drawn from the illiterate masses, but their educational levels have evolved. The social profiles of prostitutes have changed considerably over the last four hundred years. Prostitute populations have become more heterogeneous in terms of their origin, race, age, family situation, educational level, and professional background as reported.

Explanatory factors and initiation of under-age ladies into prostitution

There are many explanatory factors for the prostitution of this category of people, but it has been noted that poverty is a key factor in the emergence of this phenomenon. This situation causes many under-age ladies to drop out of school. The influence of friends is also an explanatory factor. In addition, the death of one of the parents, although not very significant, contributes to the expend of this phenomenon.

One of the under-age ladies stated the following:

I started prostitution because I stopped studying at the age of 12, as our family was poor, and then I started to make friends with friends in the neighborhood who also

did not study but dressed very expensively and had good phones. However one of them invited me to drink and we started to talk. I liked the good things, but at home, we couldn't afford them. So that's how the girl influenced me.

Beyond this statement, we also detected that parental pressure on under-age ladies influences their behaviors. A statement to clarify this is visualised in this statement from a young lady interviewed:

After the death of my father, my mother didn't know how to take care of us anymore. We were four children and I was the only girl. One day, my mother insulted me as follows: 'What kind of girl are you? What good is your beauty if men don't follow you? You're going to be okay, right?' That's how I had my first sexual intercourse at 14.

Similarly, it is important to point out that some of these under-age ladies are already having children, and the disappointment that comes from this form of marriage also comes back as a factor that affects many of the under-age ladies to return to prostitution as a survival activity. One young girl explains:

For me, the difficult conditions of life and poverty push many under-age ladies into prostitution, the fragility of these under-age ladies makes the business of bars' owner advantaged to make money.

To the question of knowing the reason which pushed these under-age ladies to engage in prostitution, investigations on the ground revealed also the following results: the satisfaction of material needs and being independent for under-age ladies but is not easy to be socialized quickly in prostitution activities of under-age ladies.

A respondent says the following:

I started on the street corner, but it wasn't easy...I was not well received by the others, the old ones; I took a lot of shocks during three evenings, I suffered because of the under-age ladies who hit me, and then the fourth day it calmed down, and here I am.

Considering these multiple factors that explain the prostitution of under-age ladies, it should be noted that parenting education and empowerment of families in this post-conflict context should be a priority for social workers in their approach. Intervening with these young prostitutes under-age ladies is a necessity for which social workers have an important role to play.

Customer service payment and earnings orientation

From our research, we find that a higher number of under-age ladies are paid between 5 and 10\$. The price is set according to the duration with a home and according to the agreement made between the client. The price is not standard for under-age ladies, there is a variation depending even on the regularity of some men who are considered potential clients.

One of our respondents said the following:

I have 2 years in this business, I had started to serve in the brothels at the age of 15, and the manager of the brothel paid me little money that could not cover my needs. That's why if a man proposed to me to sleep with him, I automatically accepted since I increase my income. I was working so hard but I could earn less, like 5 or 10\$ for a whole night depending on the convention.

The meeting places with the clients are usually nightclubs, bars, and bistros. Some meet them on the spot and others use telephone contacts to schedule meetings, shopping malls, brothels, and pimps' houses.

One of our respondents said the following:

I already have the contacts of some of my honorary clients, I know their preferences and as soon as they arrive in the bars they signal me and I join them, it's simple.

Thus, the income that comes from this activity is affected by these under-age ladies in the satisfaction of their needs although it is not enough. The people we interviewed said that they buy daily meals, use them to buy clothes, use them to buy drinks and cigarettes, and use them to pay for housing.

One respondent said:

Many of the under-age ladies come from very poor families. I know of two or three who couldn't even afford a new pair of underwear or even simple sanitary towels. And when a boy gives you such gifts regularly, it's hard to resist when he asks to sleep with you. That's how many under-age ladies became prostitutes.

One respondent said the following:

The money I earn after my work, I use to pay for accommodation here so that the manager could not give my place to someone else as my family can no longer accommodate me home.

It is noticeable from these statements that the income earned by these under-age ladies is a source of hope for them. Interventions to strengthen the capacity of women, sexuality education for under-age ladies and the implementation of programs focused on prevention and reproductive health for young women in prostitution.

Difficulties encountered by young prostitutes and conditions for abandoning their business

We found that, in addition to sexually transmitted diseases in the business, there are other consequences such as lower abdominal pain, unwanted pregnancies, and abortion, which are consequences or difficulties that under-age prostitute ladies undergo. When we asked them about the various difficulties encountered by these prostitutes in their business, the results of our surveys also point to the following: Risk of diseases, violence, kidnapping, etc.

One respondent told us the following:

Our job requires us to work late at night, and some of our clients stop us not to wearing condoms, so it exposes us to sexually transmitted diseases.

Many of the under-age ladies interviewed thought that if they could increase money, they would be able to leave, and a small number of under-age ladies, not significant said that finding a husband would be a way to leave the business.

One girl's statement illustrates the following:

If I can only find the money to start my own business, I can leave this business. Except that the money I earn per day just allows me to survive and not to save.

I can find a man who could marry me, I can give up this business and look for how to earn an honest living.

From these small statements, we can understand that young prostitutes are facing harsh lifetimes which require the intervention of social actors. Some of them, who are reluctantly involved in prostitution, are ready to change and start other activities.

Discussion

The results found that school dropout, the influence of friends, the death of parents, separation from husband, the search for autonomy, the lack of parental supervision, the satisfaction of sexual needs, and material needs are factors that influence under-age ladies to prostitution activities. Among the causes, there is not only the desire to discover sexual pleasure but also, and above all, the extreme poverty of the under-age ladies and the imbalance of the socioeconomic is also one of additional factors of prostitution. Similarly, the believes that the psychological factor is also at the origin of this phenomenon. Thus, we found that the prostitution of under-age ladies in the urban environment of Bukavu Town is aimed at satisfying their needs. It is thanks to this activity that they find what to wear, eat, and dress. Unfortunately, the consequences of this activity are also visible. Mary-Anne, (2021) informs that prostitution is a survival strategy. However, it is a mistake to believe that these women are pure victims. There is no single reason why some women turn to prostitution. Our findings on the survival strategies of prostitute's under-age ladies in Bukavu support the idea that the money they earn helps them survive in the urban environment despite challenges. As mentioned by as mentioned by Hounmenou (2016). Most prostitutes are doing prostitution for survival and to support their families. Informing on strategies for the effective social reintegration of under-age ladies prostitutes in the urban environment of Bukavu, they propose to be strengthened economically to find other work alternatives. The organisation of awareness-raising and educational sessions would be important for these young women for their mental health but also to minimize the possible risks to their lives. Thus, supporting families at risk (poor) would be an upstream intervention to prevent the exploitation of under-age ladies. the strategy envisaged for prostituted under-age ladies should be the reinforcement of preventive measures and implementation of policies. Because of this, the actors at this level should look for ways to improve their skills in alternative activities and set up or establish a framework for dialogue where they will exchange information and treat it objectively to identify their problem. With this in mind, the proposed strategy includes the following points: Awareness

and sensitisation, the establishment of specific programs that focus on the mental and physical health of young prostitutes as well as psychosocial support.

As we can read in Mayer, (2011), some women claim prostitution as a profession, and some educators are committed to reaching out to women who prostitute themselves by setting up prevention and protection actions for their health. For Mayer, a series of oppositions distinguishes between two forms of prostitution, one commonly called traditional and the other networks; the first is designated as good, the other as bad. Despite that difference, we believe that the role of the social worker is essential in supporting not only under-age ladies in prostitution but also families at risk and the entire community in a post-conflict context characterized by the loss of women's autonomy. Establishing trust as explained by Jocelyne & Laetitia, (2016) is important in the process of helping this category. Another trend is due to liberal and radical feminists. The former calls for the right to prostitute, while the latter sees prostitution as exploitation. Prostitution reflects class differences in society, ranging from luxury prostitution to that practiced in poverty. Nevertheless, all the evidence shows that the vast majority of women in prostitution find themselves in some situations of exploitation and violence that they did not choose and from which they can hardly free themselves without the assistance of professionals.

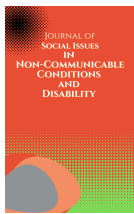
Thus, in the context of accumulating knowledge about the causes of prostitution, studies are now questioning the processes that lead to an exit from prostitution proving that the vast majority of under-age ladies involved in prostitution would like to leave this situation if they could. Some of the literature shows a contrary view that exiting is difficult and complex. Practices with women in prostitution should focus on aspects that affect not only the women but also other dimensions that affect their families and communities. Actions at this level should provide an opportunity to remove the labels attached to these women by making them actors in their change. Our results also revealed several ambiguities in the women's discourse regarding their intentions to stop or not stop their prostitution activities, but also in the way they look at the consequences of their prostitution activities. Being aware of these ambiguities could serve as a springboard for them to better understand and take ownership of their reasons for leaving prostitution. Focus on women's strengths and resources by exploring their interests, and aspirations for change remains important to their autonomy. Practices should not be defined by a deterministic model that confines women to their victimization pathways (Jobin, 2001). Nonetheless, social intervention on prostitutes should be actualised because sex workers are at a greatly elevated risk of HIV infection (Goldenberg, 2013). Experiences of sexual exploitation of under-age prostitutes in Bukavu should through public health interventions contribute to enhancing the well-being of underage prostitutes and avoid their exploitation. Our findings reported great devastating effects of prostitution on women's psychological well-being. These women exhibit trauma-related symptoms that are characterized by their variety, intensity, and persistence. Trauma-sensitive practices need to enable women to understand how their traumatic experiences have been dealt with and access to social support is an important vehicle for change for prostitutes even if they left it (Hedin & Månsson, 2004). One of the most encouraging findings in our study relates to the benefits of support from family members and close friends. Direct interventions with family members should be encouraged to inform them that the support they can provide to these women is vital. At the same time, direct interventions with these women must provide intervention contexts

based on respect, trust, and consideration to foster the development of relationships that can promote change.

Furthermore, the women's prostitution journey is usually not linear. Services should be designed flexibly. Interventions have to be tailored to each woman's pace, individualised rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, and the back and forth between exiting and re-entering prostitution must be seen as part of the exit process, not as a failure. Africa should no longer be a labyrinth of prostitution streets, but rather a place of order, care, love, and progress (Nyamweya, 2021). This would be due to the ideas conveyed by the Ubuntu philosophy which encourages these values. Referring to the results, the profiles of these young prostitutes, especially in terms of education, require a great deal of love in the context of intensifying educational programmes for these young people. Their low income, as we have noted, should lead the State, through its obligations to protect, facilitate and realise, plan a process of social integration of young prostitutes in this entity. Prostitutes have a lack of access to justice, exploitation at work, and discrimination in health care, all of which increase their vulnerability and expose them to HIV/AIDS (Mgbako, 2019; Neequaye et al, 1991; Dunkle et al., 2004; Moore et al., 2014). The results show how much income they earn to get by on food and shelter. This reality is noted by Homaifar (2008) who explains that prostitutes embody the art of resourcefulness. Thus, child prostitution can be considered a public health problem, posing serious health and safety risks to the minors involved in the practice. Not only is it a taboo in many communities in sub-Saharan Africa, but its effects on minors in this region are also little explored (Hounmenou, 2017). In South Africa, prostitutes in this context are often below the age of 18 years and this is not the only economic context in which children are sexually exploited (Davidson & Taylor, 2006). Lutya (2010), recommends that prevention efforts such as awareness programmes and information campaigns are relevant to the prostitution phenomenon. Women who engage in survival sex do not self-identify as commercial sex workers (Lutya, 2010). Those who structure prevention programs should not confound such women with commercial sex workers, because effective intervention may vary between the two groups (Wojcicki, 2002).

Conclusion

Reintegration of under-age prostitute ladies is not impossible. It requires the involvement of different stakeholders in different perspectives which focus on implementation and enforcement of the law and socioeconomic strategies. Systemic activities on preventive and curative measures could help under-age prostitute ladies to overcome their problems. As the number of young prostitutes is increasing in Bukavu, more research is needed from social sciences and medical perspectives to improve the living conditions of these under-age ladies because are among indicators that can explain distorted development. They undergo a difficult time just supporting themselves and see their well-being deteriorate without hope of support. To the extent that this phenomenon is explained by societal causal and individual theories, these young prostitute under-age ladies are perceived as victims. From this perspective, with a multidisciplinary approach, health workers, social workers, peacemakers, and others should be engaged in preventive and curative measures as well as established in collaboration with governments policies to protect under-age ladies and regulate prostitution in urban towns. The latter can play an important role in the care of under-age ladies prostitutes in post-conflict



settings. It would also be preferable to plan the effectiveness of methods such as casework, group work, and community work to help these under-age ladies to re-establish their status but also the community in preventing this phenomenon and strengthening their power to act. As it can be seen, prostitution has found its place in public debates where it is set up as a social problem that requires answers and solutions from public policies. This is why we wanted to raise this problem which is not developed in the literature in Bukavu City and need further research and implication for different stakeholders.

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Author contributions

This work was conducted in collaboration with all authors. Murhula Kapalata Gloire was the primary researcher. All authors approved the final manuscript.

Declaration of conflicting interests

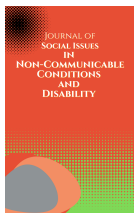
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