ARE HOMELESS WOMEN READY TO EXIT THEIR JOB AS PROSTITUTES?

Nor Amalina Mohd Adib
Zaliha Hj. Hussin
Yarina Ahmad

ABSTRACT

Being homeless in Kuala Lumpur city exposed many women to engage in prostitution. Many Malaysian are not aware of the challenges faced by homeless women that pressured them to become prostitutes and the barriers to leave their job. The purpose of this study is to explore the predicaments and barriers faced by homeless women to exit their job as prostitutes. This study applied qualitative approach using in-depth interviews involving ten homeless women who work as prostitutes in Chow Kit, Kuala Lumpur. The findings of this study revealed that homeless women have to deal with predicaments such as refusal payment by clients, social stigma (always being associated with negative connotations) and being at high risk for unwanted pregnancies. While some of the homeless women have their intention to exit their job as prostitutes; there are a number of barriers that they need to consider to make such decision. These barriers include lack of job opportunity to support themselves or to get cash money, unavailability of suitable job, lack of affordable housing (in Kuala Lumpur city, they can rent rooms temporarily or a place to stay permanently when they can afford), social stigma, availability of supports and many others. This study concludes that homeless women are surrounded with predicaments and factors that hinder them to exit their job as prostitutes. Hence, all parties need to play their roles in helping these women such as providing support, assistance, job opportunity and reduce social stigma to allow them to have better life in the future.

Keywords: homeless women, prostitutes, predicaments, barriers

OVERVIEW OF HOMELESS WOMEN WHO WORK AS PROSTITUTES

The word ‘prostitution’ itself refers to the business of sex. People usually relate prostitution with women and girls who provide sexual services to clients to obtain money. The individual prostitutes get themselves involved in prostitution due to a variety of reasons such as homelessness, running away from home, being trafficked, money constraints, child sexual abuse and others (Women’s Support Project, 2002). A study in United Kingdom found a similar trend that there is an involvement of homeless women in prostitution (Moss & King, 2012). Hence, this study looks into the homeless women who work as prostitutes in Malaysia particularly in Kuala Lumpur.

A related research by The Farley 9-country conducted by Dr. Farley, revealed that among the 854 interviewees who recently or are currently involved in prostitution in Columbia, Germany, Canada, Thailand, Turkey, Mexico, South Africa, Zambia and United States are among those individuals who experienced homelessness in their life (Day, 2008). These experiences of homelessness and engaging in prostitution especially among women and girls are closely interlinked. It can be concluded that the number of involvement in prostitution among the homeless women is rising. This is supported by Hanman and Roberts (2013), the number of homeless women who work as prostitutes increased from 24% to 36%.

This situation is also similar in Chicago in the United States, where the number of prostitutes among girls and women who engage in prostitution has risen over the years, 16,000 to 25,000. Each of them comes from various situations such as homelessness, survival needs, high rates of incest, sexual and domestic violence. In fact, 27% out of the 113 respondents (men who buy sex in Chicago) of this study claimed that majority of the prostitutes are among homeless women (Durchslag & Goswami, 2008).

However, in Malaysia, there is a limited in-depth research undertaken to understand the predicaments of homeless women and the hardship, experienced by these unfortunate vulnerable group in supporting themselves and their families. Thus, this study is focusing on the issues of homelessness and prostitution. Through the literature search, there is no research pertaining to homeless women and prostitution in Malaysia, although, there are studies conducted which linked with prostitution such as children in prostitution (Mohamad, 2011), young adults prostitute mothers (Jacob, 2008) and women involved in prostitution (Nasir et al., 2010).

As this study is linking homelessness and prostitution, it is believed that these women started their lives as homeless in that particular areas before engaging in prostitution. Based on that assumption, it is important to address the issue of homeless people (including homeless women) in Malaysia. However, it is not an easy task as the casuses of homelessness are varies. Besides, there is no accurate numbers and figures pertaining to the homeless population (Foong & Ho, 2010). In fact, homeless women are among the hidden homeless people and that is why this issue is not really taken into consideration (Gaetz et al., 2013). According to Moss and King (2012), homeless women are rough sleepers but they are not found along the streets at night on cardboard boxes because they work as prostitutes. In the Malaysian context, particularly in Kuala Lumpur, according to Hussin, (2016) study reveals that majority of the homeless women in Kuala Lumpur city are under the secondary homelessness category as
This study was conducted in a Chow Kit, Kuala Lumpur. Chow Kit is one of the red-light areas in Kuala Lumpur besides Jalan Gelang, Jalan P. Ramlee, Jalan Bukit Bintang, Persatuan Wisma Indah, around rumah tumpangan Petaling Street and Jalan Thambi Pillay (Royal Malaysian Police, 2016). Besides, most of the homeless people (including homeless women) can usually
be found in Chow Kit, Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Klang Bus Stand, Central Market, Dayabumi complex, Petaling Street, and Puduraya Bus Terminal (The Star, 2012). As this study covers two areas which are homelessness among the women and prostitution, this study chose Chow Kit as the spot in conducting the data collection.

The respondents were among the homeless women who work as prostitutes who received support and assistance from Persatuan Kebajikan Komunitu Ikhas Malaysia (IKHLAS) located at Lorong Haji Taib in Chow Kit. During the data collection, the respondents were approached at IKHLAS, and criteria of the respondents include: they must currently or have had experienced of being homeless, (2) must be a woman, not a transvestite or transsexual transgender and (3) must be homeless women who work as prostitutes in Kuala Lumpur. Before the interview sessions, all the respondents of this study were notified about the consent and purpose of this study. They were informed their right to withdraw from the interview if they face any uncomfortable situation. The data collection for this study was collected within a two-month period from April 2017 to May 2017.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE OF THE RESPONDENTS

This study involved ten respondents who were among the homeless women who work as prostitutes in Kuala Lumpur citycentre. The range age of them was from thirty to sixty years old; two in their middle thirties, two in their middle forties, four in their middle fifties and two in their middle sixties. However, those individuals who were in their middle twenties were hardly approachable. In terms of religion, nine of them were Islam. However, two of them converted to Islam. There was only one respondent who was Hindu. A majority of the respondents (eight) of this study were those who were in the secondary homelessness category as compared with two respondents who were in the primary homelessness category. Those respondents who were classified under the secondary homelessness category were renting a room in the Chow Kit area and temporarily staying with their friends.

RESULT

As this paper covers two objectives of the researcher’s study, which is delving the underlying factors of homeless women who work as prostitutes in Kuala Lumpur city centre, there are two sections of the results which are based on two objectives; (1) to examine the predicaments of homeless women who work as prostitutes and (2) to identify the barriers faced by them (prostitutes among the homeless women) to leave this work. The findings of this study were classified based on theme. The findings are exemplified below.

(1) To examine the predicaments of homeless women who work as prostitutes

Unwanted Pregnancies and Abortions

The findings reveal that among the ten respondents of this study, only one respondent had experienced unwanted pregnancy. However, the intention in doing abortion was not carried out because she planned to give away her child to somebody who is willing to adopt her baby. A majority of the respondents of this study never experienced unwanted pregnancies while engaging in this activity. As a result, there were no abortions. This is because, several of them always wear protection like condoms. Some of them had tubal ligation or took contraceptive pills as well as have fertility problem. For example, one woman (respondent of this study) narrated that:

[...] I have never experienced any unwanted pregnancies. Do not have. I already had tubal ligation a long time ago. I told the doctor that I wanted tubal ligation when I did my last birth by surgery [...] (Respondent 4, aged 50).

Refusal payment by clients

A majority of the respondents (six of them) this study mentioned that they had experienced the refusal of payment from their clients after providing their sexual services. The money that they received may be taken back by the clients and sometimes they are paid by using drugs. This situation leads to creating dispute between them. For example, one woman (respondent of this study) stated that:

Yes, I experienced it. I already received the money after I had provided my services but he took the money back [...] (Respondent 5, aged 49).

Stigma

Most of the respondents (seven of them) of this study declared that they had experienced stigma from the society especially people around them. Involving in prostitution and receiving stigma from the society cannot be ruled out. They mentioned that people usually talk bad things about them and sometimes use abusive words to hurt their feelings. They acknowledge the consequences from their involvement in prostitution especially from the public. Up to a point where they could not care less about people around them and become used to being in the situation. For example, one woman (respondent of this study) reported that:

Yes, we experience it. A lot [...] Sometimes, they will say ‘Look, that grandma is coming’ [...] I do not care, I just walk away [...] (Respondent 6, aged 60).

(2) To identify the barriers faced by them (prostitutes among the homeless women) to leave this work

The findings of this study revealed three top most barriers that make the homeless women unable to leave their job as prostitutes which are: (1) stigma, (2) lack of affordable housing and (3) drug addiction. The findings are exemplified below.

Stigma

There are seven respondents of this study who mentioned that stigma become one of the barriers for them to not leave this activity. Stigma that they receive makes them valued as an object rather than human. In fact, all the stigmas that they receive
make them feel devalued and oppressed. Due to this situation, it urges them to continue being a prostitute rather than leave this activity to build a new life. For example, among the seven respondents, one of them narrated that:

_There is (stigma) [...] You have to face it especially when they know about your job like being accused by them [...] They often say something that hurts you_ (Respondent 5, aged 49).

**Lack of affordable housing**

Out of ten respondents, five of them stated that lack of affordable housing become one of the barriers for them to not leave this activity. No place to stay becomes the barrier for them to leave this activity. In fact, there is an intention among them to leave and run away from this activity, but due to inadequate housing make them resists to leave this activity. For example, one woman (respondent of this study) reported that:

_[...] I have thought of getting out of this place, but, if I go out of this place [...] where am I supposed to stay. I think of all that [...] So, just work like this. It is easy. I directly get money in cash, all in cash_ (Respondent 1, aged 37).

**Drug addiction**

Drugs are prominently one of the barriers among the respondents to not leave behind prostitution. Most of them mentioned that drugs are easy to be accessed in Chow Kit, through phone call and from their friends even if they are not involved in prostitution. However, this study concludes that the prostitute themselves get money and from that money they can buy drugs. Prostitution is one of their money sources to purchase drugs. For example, one woman (respondent of this study) mentioned that:

_Drugs can be easily accessed everywhere in this area (Chow Kit). It is easy to get, like through phone call_ (Respondent 1, aged 37).

**DISCUSSION**

As this study only involved respondents who work as prostitutes in the area of Kuala Lumpur city, the findings of this study can only be generalized to similar cases in Kuala Lumpur area. This is due the argument that different location (such as, in Johore Bahru, Penang etc.) may have different culture and norms that influence the issue of homeless women who works as prostitutes.

From the findings of this study, in terms of predicament, 90% of the respondents of this study mentioned that they never experienced any unwanted pregnancies as well as the abortions while engaging in prostitution. A majority of them were wearing protection to prevent from getting pregnant while doing this activity such as wearing condoms, did tubal ligation and took contraceptive pills. Besides, due to health problems such as fertility issues, also prevented them from getting pregnant. This situation can be supported by a study conducted by Erikson et al., (2015) where a majority of the sex workers in Gulu, Uganda were taking dual contraceptives (condoms and taking pills at the same time) to prevent themselves from getting pregnant (unintended pregnancies).

Meanwhile, 60% of them stated that they had experienced refusal payment by clients. This situation happened when the clients refuse to pay after the services are provided. Sometimes, it creates dispute between them as the respondents were not satisfied with their clients’ behaviour in refusing to pay. This situation is also similar with other countries such as Nakura, Africa where the dispute happened when the client refused to pay the amount of money after the service was provided. This situation made the prostitute angry and she cut off the client’s penis with a knife (Dachen, 2016).

Besides, a majority of them (70%) stated that they had experienced stigma from the public especially people around them. People criticise them when they know about their (respondents) job as a prostitute. In Canada, around 43 prostitutes who were among the homeless group stated that they are usually categorised and seen as immoral, home-wreckers, dirty and hyper-sexualised by people around them (Bruckert & Chabot, 2010). People normally bad mouth and negatively judge them. Most of them declared that this situation affected their emotional stability. This similar stigma trend is shown between Malaysia and Canada.

From the findings of this objective, it shows that there are similar trend of predicaments in terms of unwanted pregnancies, refusal payment by the clients and stigma between Malaysia and other global countries. Each of these situations can be supported from the studies done by other countries in showing that these kinds of circumstances do exist.

The findings in terms of barriers shows that 70% of the respondents of this present study revealed that stigma become the barriers for them to leave this activity. All the stigmas that they receive make them unable to leave their job as a prostitute. In fact, it indirectly affects their self-esteem such as low self-worth, low self-efficacy and authenticity. In a study conducted by Burgmann (2016) stated that there is no pathway for the homeless who work as a prostitute to leave this activity to build a new life. All the insults and abusive words will be thrown to them once their type of job as a prostitute is known by the public. In fact, they also claimed that stigma make them return to prostitution. Thus, it shows that stigma has become one of the worst barriers for them to leave the prostitution.

Besides stigma, 50% of the respondents of this present study claimed that lack of affordable housing also become one of the barriers to leave prostitution. If they go out from the Chow Kit area, they do not have any place to stay. Similar situation occurs among the homeless women who work as a prostitute in United Kingdom where 77% of the respondents claimed that housing problem become the pull factor that makes it unable for them to leave this activity (Harvey, 2012).

Last but not least, majority of the respondents of this study stated that drug is easy to obtain especially in Chow Kit area. Even though they mentioned that even though they are not involved in prostitution, they still can obtain and obtain access to drugs. In a study conducted by Martin (2012) showed that 37 of the women who were homeless or had experienced being homeless
revealed that they were currently or had experienced substance abuse during their homelessness. However, this study believes that a majority of the respondents of the present study buy drugs by using the money that they obtain through prostituting themselves.

**CONCLUSION**

As a conclusion, living as a prostitute especially among the women, is similar to being an enslaved object rather than a human being. They have to face all those kinds of brutality either from their clients, public, own families or from other parties. Sometimes, it hurts and kills them slowly until sucking away their own life. They have to sacrifice their own dignity to keep on surviving. As prostitutes, they have to go through the entire unpleasant situations like unwanted pregnancies and abortions, refusal payment by clients, stigma and others. Deep in their hearts, they really want to leave this activity and start creating their new journey life, but there are several barriers that make them unable to escape this activity such as stigma, lack of affordable housing, drug addiction and others. These situations become the pull factors for them to escape from the life of prostitution.

In reducing the number of involvement among the homeless women who work as prostitutes in Kuala Lumpur city centre, all parties need to work together as a team. Relevant parties must be effectively coordinated within the team or task force to address the homelessness issue first. This team or task force should include government authority, public and private agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), community and associations. Although the situation of homeless and prostitution may be different from one country to another, but there are lessons could be learned from other countries in addressing homelessness. As an example, Denmark is said to have an effective approach in addressing the homelessness issue. Denmark is one of the countries that have effective intervention programmes such as City Programme that help in increasing the capacity and variety of support housing and also expending the range of interventions in many types and numbers (Benjaminsen & Dyb, 2008). However, in Denmark, the homelessness situation is based on Social Services Act (Benjaminsen & Dyb, 2008).

This study concludes that homelessness that works as prostitutes are willing to exit their job; however, there were predicaments and barriers that they faced. It is not only the question of their readiness; it is also the question of whether we (all parties) are ready to support and provide assistance to them to exit their job as prostitutes. Further, the country also needs to be proactive in dealing with this issue—it is argued that there are more potential women including homeless women who will engage in prostitution. Hence, Malaysia needs to tackle the root causes of this problem particularly poverty, family breakdown, low literacy and drug abuse. The findings of this study are useful for the government to strengthen policy and acts related to women, homelessness issue as well as prostitution. At present Malaysia only rely on the Destitute Person Act 1977, and there is no specific act on homelessness. The Destitute Person Act 1977 needs to be reviewed to cover homelessness; or perhaps, it is high time for the government to formulate a specific act for homelessness.

One of the limitations of this study is the scope of the area which only covers Kuala Lumpur city. Future research should be conducted in other cities in Malaysia such as Johore Bahru, Penang and others. This will provide a holistic view of homeless women who works as prostitutes in Malaysia.

**ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This paper would like to show the gratitude for coordinator and members of Graduate Research in Print (GRiP) Program, from Faculty of Administrative Science, UiTM Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia for their guidance in assisting the author to write this paper academically and their full support in the publication of this paper.

**REFERENCES**


St Mungo’s Broadway. (2014). Rebuilding Shattered lives. Getting the right help at the right time to women who are homeless or at risk. Retrieved at July 20, 2017 from https://rebuildingshatteredlives.org/read-the-report/


Women’s Support Project. (2002). For organisations working with women in prostitution, 19.


Nor Amalina Mohd Adib
Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Selangor
40450, Shah Alam, Selangor
Email: amalinamohdadib@yahoo.com.my

Zaliha Hj. Hussin
Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Selangor
40450, Shah Alam, Selangor
Email: drzaliha@salam.uitm.edu.my

Yarina Ahmad
Faculty of Administrative Science & Policy Studies
Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) Selangor
40450, Shah Alam, Selangor
Email: yarina@salam.uitm.edu.my