

Child Abuse and Prostitution Phenomena: Critical Issues in Nigeria's Sustainable Development

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Abstract

It needs not be gainsaid that the reality of the issues of child abuse and prostitution are irrefutable phenomena in Nigeria as in many developing and developed nations of the world as studies have shown. This development has become such a worrisome menace which besides negating the fundamental rights and dignity of the child as endorsed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989 also has diverse associated implications. The concern generated by this development is predicated on the consciousness of the significant position of children in the family and society as the future generation, leaders of tomorrow and potential flag-bearers of any nation, who need to be properly cared for and nurtured and as such provided the enabling environment to develop their potentials for such enormous responsibilities. Hence, the abuse and exposure of a child to prostitution has devastating consequences for both the individual child and the society at large; and undermining such consequences can result in serious far-reaching problems not just to the individual but the larger society. Although a number of factors may be adduced as accounting for this sordid development, which manifests in diverse peculiar dimensions as shall be highlighted in the course of the study, other vital concerns that equally provoke serious consideration include the increasing prevalence of the phenomena; the seeming apathy or insensibility of the society over their devastating consequences, as well as the urgent steps that need to be taken or accelerated to tackle the ugly development. To address the foregoing, the study shall critically examine these phenomena as to provide a proper platform to understand the dimensional intricacies of the issues involved and as such raise our consciousness on the urgent necessity to forge a common bond against the insidious threat posed by the phenomena.

Keywords

Child Abuse, Child Exploitation, Sexual Abuse, Nigeria, Sustainable Development

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1. Introduction

It would be proper to primarily have a clear understanding of the term, 'child' in order to appropriately contextualize it in this study. The 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [1] which Nigeria endorsed in 1991, has defined a child as a person below the age of 18; a definition from which The Child Right's Act 2003 of Nigeria draws its strength by defining a child as a person who has not attained the age of eighteen years, thus laying to rest the "uncertainty"

that hitherto trailed "the definition of a child under the Nigeria law" [2, p.28]. Hence, as Akwara *et al.* [2] further indicated, children who fall under this age group are considered "the most vulnerable members of any community; they are fragile, frail, innocent, naïve, defenseless and often oblivious of danger"; and as such are incapable of making informed decisions. Little wonder why they are most susceptible to incidents of abuse and prostitution as most adults cash in on this susceptibility to maltreat and exploit them. Based on the above understanding, child abuse is therefore construed as all forms of maltreatment perpetrated

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against anyone within this age group. From the report of the Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention of World Health Organization held in 1999 in Geneva, these maltreatments include:

Physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power. [3]

It might be instructive at this point to draw our attention to Clark *et al.*'s [4, p.57] observation that "child abuse was traditionally limited to the actions of a parent, guardian or other persons responsible for a child's welfare", which perhaps tended to limit their perpetration at homes; more recently however, as these scholars also added, the concept has expanded to include actions of others who are equally responsible for "the out-of-home care of children" like teachers, health workers, day-care workers, clergies and other responsible adults. The implication is that these persons may not be directly related to the child, but are persons in whose care the child is somewhat assigned, be it at home or elsewhere. The abuse, therefore, does not only take place at homes and perpetrated by persons known to and trusted by the child, but also beyond; thus presenting us with a rather broad than limited environment where incidents of abuse thrive.

Child prostitution on the other hand refers to the sexual exploitation of a child for remuneration in cash or in-kind. It emphasizes "the use of a child in sexual activities for remuneration or any other form of consideration" as described in Article 2 of the *Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography* [5, p.11]; where 'any other form of consideration' also implies the provision of sexual services in exchange for goods, services or favours, as well as money, including necessities such as food, shelter, or drugs among others. It is rather worrisome, therefore, to contemplate the fact that "sexual exploitation of children has become a rampant feature in societies the world over" as Bejide [6, p.83] has noted; and Nigeria is not exempted. Since it would therefore be impossible to discuss child prostitution without reference to child abuse, especially child sexual abuse, with regard to their underlying factors and implications, it might not be far-fetched either appreciating the reason why they form the focus of this study – they are inseparable phenomena. Hence, since child prostitution can essentially be located within the realm of child abuse, especially child sexual abuse, they do not need to be discussed in isolation. It is important to note also that the issues of child abuse and prostitution are not exclusive to any

particular child-gender; they involve as much female children as their male counterparts.

2. A Dimensional Perspective on Child Abuse

In the light of the fact that child abuse and child prostitution cannot be discussed in isolation, it would be necessary therefore to take a look at the ramifying dimensions involved. In this regard, five major categories of incidents of abuse are considered here; these include physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, neglect and child exploitation.

2.1. Physical Abuse

This refers to any action by a parent or person responsible for the care of a child which results in actual or potential physical harm to the child. Although such harm is not accidental, and may not have been intended either, but rather resulting from severe discipline, yet obviously not a justifiable one for such child's age. Physical abuse, as Jill *et al.* [7] opine, is generally characterized by injury, such as bruises and fractures that result from beating, kicking, hitting with a hand, stick, strap, or other objects, and burning among others.

2.2. Emotional Abuse

Emotional abuse, also known as psychological maltreatment, may be seen as the emotional ill-treatment of a child to the detriment of the child's emotional development. Umobong [8, p.110] defines it as any attitude, behaviour or failure to act on the part of a caregiver which interferes with a child's mental health, social development or sense of self-worth. This refers to a caregiver's behaviour that conveys to a child an intense feeling of worthlessness, being unloved, unwanted, and perhaps only of value in meeting others' needs. This does not occur only in homes as a child can also be emotionally abused by a teacher in the school or elsewhere by other adults in position of power over the child in acts that could manifest in "restriction of movement, patterns of belittling, denigrating, scapegoating, threatening, scaring, discriminating, ridiculing or other non-physical forms of hostile or rejecting treatment" [3]. Umobong emphasized that emotional abuse is perhaps the least understood and yet the most prevalent, cruelest and destructive type of abuse. This is obviously as a result of its gravesocial and psychological implications to the child's development.

2.3. Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse according to *Child Maltreatment*, cited in Clark *et al.* [4, p.57], refers to "the involvement of the child in sexual activity to provide sexual benefit to the perpetrator,

including contacts for sexual purposes, molestation, statutory rape, (child) prostitution, (child) pornography, exposure, incest or other sexually exploitative activities". This also involves all forms of sexual violence against the child including incest, early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, rape, involvement in pornography as well as sexual slavery. From the foregoing, it is obvious that sexual abuse covers a wide range of sexual acts, sexually motivated behaviours involving a child, or sexual exploitation of a child which he or she does not fully comprehend, and as such unable to give informed consent or is not developmentally prepared for. Although the secrecy that normally characterizes cases of sexual abuse as Umobong observes, has made them the most often under-reported forms of child maltreatment; commonly reported cases however involve incest, which is sexual abuse occurring among family members, including those in biological families, adoptive families, and step-families [9].

2.4. Neglect

Neglect, as described by WHO [3] highlights the failure to provide for the basic needs of the child in all development gamut including "health, education, emotional, nutrition, shelter and safe living conditions, in the context of resources reasonably available to the family or caretakers" that affects or has the potential of affecting "the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development". It is generally characterized by omissions in care resulting in significant harm or risk of significant harm to the child [7], a situation where guardians or parents fail to perform tasks necessary for a child's wellbeing which can in turn jeopardize the child's health and safety, even the failure to prevent or protect such child from harm as much as possible.

2.5. Child Exploitation

Child exploitation is defined as the use of the child in work or other activities which include but not limited to child labour and child prostitution for the benefit of others [3]. This implies the taking of undue advantage of the child's lack of power and status thus jeopardizing his/her physical or mental health, education, or spiritual, moral or social-emotional development. This comprises of situations of manipulation, misuse, abuse, victimization, oppression or ill-treatment as outlined by *Save the Children* initiative. Sexual exploitation and economic exploitation are the two major dimensions of child exploitation. Sexual exploitation according to *Save the Child* initiative refers to:

The abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust for sexual purposes; this includes profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the exploitation of another as well as personal sexual gratification. [10]

Examples include child prostitution, trafficking of children for sexual abuse and exploitation, child pornography, and sexual slavery. Economic exploitation on the other hand as defined by the same initiative is "the use of the child in work or other activities for the benefit of others", which includes but not limited to child labour. Other examples are: child domestic work, child soldiers and the recruitment and involvement of children in armed conflict, the use of children for criminal activities including the sale and distribution of narcotics, as well the involvement of children in any harmful work.

It may also be instructive to add that there are equally several culturally constructed attitudes and behaviours that constitute abuse to a child which could also manifest in any or some of the above highlighted dimensions. These include discrimination, child marriage and female genital mutilation among others.

3. Child Abuse and Prostitution: A Critical Analysis

From the foregoing highlight on the dimensions of child abuse, sexual abuse and child exploitation appear to have more direct bearing on child prostitution, though one needs not also discountenance the role neglect perhaps might equally play to contribute to this. Thus, considering the significant position children occupy both in the family and society, the above mentioned dimensions no doubt strike deeply at the very foundation of our society and therefore constitute a big affront to public wellbeing; taking cognizance also of the fact that no environmental issue can be successfully discussed in isolation of the people that populate such environment and whose actions impact on it.

3.1. Causes of Child Abuse and Prostitution Phenomena

In this regard, a critical consideration of the prevailing socio-economic situation in the country is worthy of note as a major reason for the prevalence of incidents of child abuse and prostitution. Widespread poverty, deprivation and struggle for survival have become a prevailing experience that contributes to the reason for this development. For instance, child labour which has resulted to high rate of street trading by children in almost every major city in Nigeria has become commonplace as an easy way out of economic pressures at many homes. This has often brought about situations where children, especially young girls are exposed to incidents of sexual exploitation. Ebigbo [11, p.4] in affirmation decries this sort of exposure as the possibility is always high that majority of these hawking girls "will either be raped or enticed into sexually compromising situations

and virtually all of them will be sexually molested through touching and/or visual and verbal enticements to sex". Akpan and Oluwabamide [12, p.191] in corroboration inferred that some of the girls have by this means fallen victims of unscrupulous characters who enticed them with money or other gifts items to rape them; while some have equally in the process got entangled with deviant characters who rather turned them to semi-prostitutes, thereby getting them involved in indiscriminate sex. Aderinto [13, p.11] therefore sees hawking as "providing enabling conditions for luring female juveniles into prostitution". Incidentally, when such children have formed this kind of habit from such exposure, it might not be so easy for them to disentangle themselves from it, especially with the *seeming* gains in cash or kind that accrue from it. They thus keep a chain of sex partners and probably continue such life of prostitution even to adulthood.

It is also rather ironical to contemplate that out of poverty and resultant inability to cater for the family, some parents have resorted to desperate alternatives including practically abandoning their children, while some have literally sold theirs out for all kinds of job in return for financial gain; thus ending up exposing them to all kinds of abuse and sexual exploitation including trafficking and prostitution. Such rejection invariably forces children to leave their family environment to become street children; who, having been made vulnerable and in dire need or quest for bare survival, end up as easy prey for all manner of exploitation from those who would promise them any iota of comfort or solution. Thus, they become hardened by the treacherous street environment in which they must learn to survive. It is not surprising, therefore, that the foregoing and related reasons alike tend to also provide explanations for the rising incidents of child labour, child prostitution and its new trend of sex tourism which Terrero [14, p.12] has cited United Nations' definition as "tourism organized with the primary purpose of facilitating the effecting of a commercial sexual relationship with a child", both within and outside the country through trafficking, which refers to the recruitment, transportation, or transfer of children for the purpose of exploitation. Hence, the trafficking of children for the purpose of prostitution and other forms of exploitative engagements has been identified as a widespread phenomenon in Nigeria [15, p.1]. This corroborates the report of the Committee on the Rights of the Child that a growing number of children are being forced into prostitution and/or trafficked within or from Nigeria for sexual purposes [16].

It is not also uncommon to see female children being married out even at age twelve or less because of the poverty level of parents, besides at times being a cultural practice of the people. However, apart from socio-economic and cultural factors, "attitudes and perceptions of adults" [11, p.5]

regarding child abuse are also further reasons why the menace has continued to thrive, including ignorance of the consequences. Little wonder why Terrero [14] opines that people argue that a child or young person is less likely to carry venereal disease. Thus, it is not surprising that "the fear of venereal disease", as Aderinto [13, p.21] discloses, "has always played a dominant role in providing demand for child prostitutes". Some people have also borne the erroneous belief that intercourse with virgins or girls in their teens could cure venereal diseases [13; 14], and are absolutely blinded to the possibility of their contacting venereal diseases through same means; while some also believe that it increases their virility, as well as brings longevity and success to them in business. It may also not be uncommon for perpetrators to cash in on the docility of children to carry out their nefarious acts since they are less able to defend themselves. This deviant attitude, as Busuttill [17] opines, could also be attributed to the feeling of sexual and economic power by perpetrators, or just the desire for new experience, or even the feeling of impunity as facilitated simply by the anonymity that surrounds their actions. This is why child sexual exploitation is considered a hidden crime. One could therefore imagine how these highlighted warped mindsets and perceptions could crazily and irrepressibly drive an adult to sexually abuse and exploit a child by employing every manipulative intrigue to exert power over the child: perhaps through physical violence, emotional blackmail or financial pressure as already noted. Perhaps also, because of the remuneration often involved, Davidson [18, p.15] may have equally attributed the attitudes of some exploiters' use of children in prostitution to "moral indifference" than willful act of harm, conditioned by a free market society where buyers are solely guided by self-interest rather than moral responsibility to the producer or provider of the products they buy. A critical consideration of the highlighted attitudes and perceptions, therefore, only portrays the level of ignorance exhibited by such culprits as to what they were doing or even the consequences of their actions.

Researches also reveal a growing awareness of the fact that most perpetrators of sexual exploitation, especially sexual abuse of children are more often than not known to them. Some are direct family members, and more commonly, extended family members including biological, adoptive and step-family members as well as family friends. However, such cases are mostly swept under the carpet as both children and adults are often reluctant to disclose the incidents; perhaps because of societal conceptions regarding such acts as well as possible stigmatization [19]. In the light of the above, such cases of abuse escalate much more also because those in whose responsibility the child's protecting is entrusted are failing in their duty. Sometimes, sexually

abused children in their effort to escape from the kind of 'violation' they experience within such family or familiar environment, end up in the hands of people who would further facilitate their deeper involvement in such threats including exposure to drugs, prostitution and possible trafficking, perfected through every alluring tactics including offer of food, clothes, attention, friendship, love, and a seemingly safe shelter. Even when the child may be unwilling, his or her complicity is ensured through every possible coercive means.

Thus evidence abound through studies that majority of adult prostitutes or commercial sex workers have suffered sexual abuse as children. It suffices therefore to note that sexual abuse of a child also has way of serving as a precursor to the life of prostitution for the child unless there is a timely intervention. Unfortunately, some of these cases are never really disclosed, perhaps among other reasons, for fear, shame, self-blame and confusion as to whether such experience was abuse or not; more so, since the victims may have been told that it was normal. Another angle to this is the fact that far more sexually abused victims will go on to sexually abuse others, and thus reinforce an inevitable vicious circle. A study on convicted sex offenders confirms the foregoing by revealing that a substantial percentage of them provided confirmed evidence of being sexually abused as children [20].

3.2. Possible Implications or Consequences

Undoubtedly, child abuse, especially sexual abuse and prostitution leads to very negative effects on the wellbeing and mental health of children, besides affecting their families and society at large. Foremost, sexual abuse and exploitation of children negate their fundamental rights and dignity as endorsed by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child [1]; and as such impinge on their physical or mental health, as well as on their emotional and psychological development. On the physical level, as Busuttill [17] observes, the consequence may include vaginal tearing, physical after-effects of torture, pain, infection, or unwanted pregnancy. The implication is that genital injury as well as sexually transmitted diseases, even the contraction of HIV/AIDS, besides unwanted pregnancy, may result from child sexual abuse and prostitution; for there are reported evidence that children who are exploited in prostitution lack information about STIs and genital hygiene [21, p. 27]. Hence, such unwanted pregnancies can also result to further stigmatization and even unsafe abortions as the case may be. On the psychological level, besides the trauma that may accompany cases of *violent exploitations – which can have effects broadly similar to other traumatic experiences* (<http://www.unhcr.org/3bb81aea4.pdf>, p. 20), other

manifestations of symptoms of depression, personality or sexual orientation confusion, problems with behaviour (aggressiveness or anger), insomnia, loss of self-confidence, mistrust or hatred towards adults, may also result [17, p. 1]. In the light of the foregoing, therefore, as already noted, the negative effects of child sexual abuse and prostitution is not only with regard to the individual child, individual families and entire society are also at risk; since those who propel these phenomena are individual family members, and of society by extension. Hence, the danger of sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS that are capable of being transmitted and spread through these channels needs pose a fundamental public health concern to all and sundry.

4. The Way Forward

Having highlighted the possible causes and obvious consequences of child sexual abuse and prostitution phenomena, *what necessary measures, therefore, need be taken in order to tackle the worrisome trend?* In this regard, it will be instructive to note that since the trend portends a great threat to the society at large; all hands must likewise be on deck in determined quest for solution. It is heartwarming foremost to observe that since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the AU Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, among other relevant international instruments, Nigeria has instituted various legislative and institutional measures at both the Federal and State levels, aimed at addressing various forms of violence against children [22]. However, much as the institution of these measures are steps in the right direction, much more needs to be done to ensure consolidated actions by stakeholders at Federal and State levels to make the noble objectives of these measures a reality through effective implemented/enforcement. To achieve this, conscious steps must first be taken to address the economic pressures of the Nigerian citizenry, so as to enable families rise above the poverty level that sometimes triggers some of the enabling conditions of child abuse and other exploitative tendencies on the child. Besides providing employment opportunities and other poverty reduction measures as a way of economic empowerment, it must be ensured too that remunerations are duly made available, rather than the continued perpetuation of the several months' salary delay syndrome that usually puts most families in frustration for alternative ways out – even to extreme levels.

All tiers of government should embark on serious enlightenment campaign in order to sensitize the public on the rights of children as well as campaign against harmful cultural practices and abuses perpetrated against children. The public must be adequately sensitized on the chain

implications of these phenomena as the consequences, especially health implications, transcend both the individual child and perpetuating individuals, to entire family and society at large; considering also the gross misconceptions and attitudes of most perpetrators. Even the necessary measures at rehabilitating victims should not be discountenanced. The Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are also enjoined in this clarion call of sensitization and campaign. Religious groups and educational institutions also have important roles to play in condemning incidents of child abuse and prostitution by highlighting on the harm associated with the phenomena. Hughes [23, p.6] opines that “religious communities, from the grassroots to the leadership, need to use their voice of authority to combat the increasing sexual exploitation of victims and its normalization”. The media outfits are not left out in this clarion call, since they could serve as a veritable platform in development partnership to promote responsible news coverage and entertainment programming aimed at more effective media campaigns to educate and inform citizens on these phenomena, as well as on possible ways of combating them. Hence, since development is about change and about people, and indeed positive change in the living conditions of the people, it is our makes up belief that our nation would never be sidetracked from the auspicious rungs of sustainable development if people should consistently imbibe appropriate change toward patterns of society that allow for better realization of human values for the good of the individual and society at large.

5. Conclusion

A popular cliché has it that a healthy nation is a wealthy nation; and this also goes for the individual, since it is the congregation of the individuals that makes up the nation. A critical examination of the issues involved in this discourse undoubtedly reveals an obvious linkage between poverty and wellbeing – the wellbeing of not just the individual but also of a society. There is manifest evidence from the study of the fact that poverty is a great scourge – an endemic plague that has so engulfed a greater percentage of our populace and as such so insidiously and menacingly destroying the fabric of the society. How?...One may ask. Having critically assessed the issues of child abuse and prostitution, poverty stands out as a major cause that subtly catalyzes these menaces, as the reality of the economic situation in the country continues to pressure and overwhelm many homes. This has brought about situations where children have been forced, and often out of schools, to contribute in alleviating such economic pressures on families through various dimensions of child labour, etc. In some extreme cases, others have either by apparent act of commission or omission been abandoned to

their fate, to fend for themselves; and as such transcend from that level of neglect to being further exposed to the vulnerability of falling victims of various other forms of exploitation including sexual abuse, prostitution and trafficking to mention but a few.

However, the study also reveals the fact that the issues of child abuse and prostitution are also multi-dimensional, encompassing social, economic and cultural levels. Ironically, most of the perpetrators who facilitate and indulge in these crimes against children are all out to satisfy one selfish desire and purpose or another; even those that are built on so great erroneous beliefs. Having also examined the obvious implications or consequences of these crimes, which is not to the well-being of the individual (neither the victim nor the perpetrator), nor the society in general, it needs not be overstated that the issues truly call for concerted concern and effort, to be effectively addressed. From all fronts, all hands are solicited to be on deck to check the scourge. With the government at the forefront living up to its responsibilities, every other stakeholder will no doubt be encouraged to contribute its quota in finding solution to these phenomena. It is also the belief of the authors of this paper that with enough sensitization of the public on these issues, including the issue of child rights which has obviously become a development issue, solution is, indeed, not far-fetched. If we must actually be set on the part of development, and sustainable development at that, the future which belongs to children must not be compromised in any way by jeopardizing their present situations. This is informed by the reality of the fact that the issue of sexual exploitation, especially of children, is considered a forbidden subject matter in many quarters, hence giving impetus to the considerable silence that surrounds it. Yet, it is the society that feels the brunt of it all.

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