

The Phenomenon of Commercial Sex Work in Nigeria: A Literature Review

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ABSTRACT

Commercial sex work or prostitution has been an age-long social vice and all government policies including legislations aimed at its eradication have proved abortive. The more punitive the measure, aimed at preventing prostitution, the more the situation increases. Commercial sex work has transcended the brothels and the streets into every facet of the society. This situation implies that forceful means of preventing prostitution does not solve the problem; rather any measure towards curbing the phenomenon of commercial sex work in Nigeria should be directed to meet the social and economic needs of the practitioners. This paper focuses on reviewing literatures on the concept, causes and forms of prostitution. The paper adopted the functionalist theory as an underpinning to explain the phenomenon of commercial sex work. Recommendations were proffered on ways of preventing commercial sex work in Nigeria.

KEY WORDS: commercial, sex, workers, prostitutes, prostitution

INTRODUCTION

Commercial sex work is an age long profession. It is basically the practice of providing sex for money or other material

and non-material benefits. It is not restricted to any culture as it is a global trend that transcends all age barriers and in some cases girls as young as eight years are involved. Commercial sex has evolved over the last two decades, (National Behaviour Survey 2004). According to the National Behaviour Survey (2004), commercial sex work is not restricted to females alone, it has indeed become complex in different ways as there are male sex workers in Nigeria who have sex with men for commercial reasons.

Commercial sex work is both historical and cultural, with every culture adopting her own standards and attitudes. From ancient history, concubines and courtiers lived in the same house with the wife and often had the same rights (Jeness, 1990). Bullough and Bullough (1978) were of the opinion that along the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, there were many shrines and temples or "houses of heaven" dedicated to various deities, documented by the Greek historian Herodotus. In these temples, sacred prostitution was a common practice where kings established their legitimacy by taking part in the ceremony for one night on the tenth day of the New Year. This practice came to an end when Emperor Constantine

in the fourth century destroyed the goddess temples and replaced them with Christianity.

Commercial sex has particularly taken a worrisome and indeed despicable turn through trafficking in person and violation of human rights, and these have become a major issue in Nigeria (Human Right Action, 1997). In recent time, commercial sex has become a lucrative business in Nigeria especially among the youths (Ikpe, 2008). Research has it that, 31% of sex workers are , particularly in Nigeria's higher institutions (Onah, 2000). Furthermore, sex work has now become an occupation especially for the girls who find their ways to countries like Italy, Netherlands, Brazil, Norway etc, where commercial sex work is highly profitable (Onah, 2000). Sex work also serves as one of the sources of revenue for government hence taxes are paid to the government (Aday, 1990). Aday (1990) further states that sex workers face systematic discrimination throughout the world and are therefore at risk of variety of abuses such as police extortion, rape, arbitrary detention and others. There are violations of their human and labour rights which in some cases amount to slavery.

In Nigeria, sex work is an illegal business because, the law prohibits it, but no active action has really been taken against it by the government (Onah, 2000). Commercial sex workers can be found in hotels, bars, brothels and on the street, (Onah, 2000). Despite the efforts made by the government and other private organizations to eradicate sex work in some parts of Nigeria, it has rather grown to become one of the most outstanding social problems that have really apprehended the youths (Onah, 2000). The people involved in commercial sex experience negative effects

even though they still make out from it. Lex (1992), argued that sex work has been identified as the core group for transmission of HIV/AIDS and STDs; thus, they face discrimination throughout the world. Due to the diseases that befall these people on daily basis, sex work has been considered a menace in the society (Lex, 1992). Commercial sex work is termed as deviance and unhealthy in the society. It is also a big embarrassment to the government and the families whose youths are involved in such acts, such families will lack their respect from people in the society no matter their position in the society, (Onah, 2000).

Conceptual clarification

In this paper, commercial sex work shall be used interchangeably with prostitution. The word prostitution is derived from the Latin word "*prostituta*" meaning: "*pro*" (up-front) and "*situere*" (offer for sale). Though, most sex workers activist group rejected the name since late1970 and preferred to be called sex workers. Weizer (2000) sees prostitution as the business or practice of engaging in sexual relations in exchange for financial reward. The person who works in this field is called a prostitute and is a kind of sex worker and it is one of the branches of sex industry. Prostitution occurs in a variety of ways such as full time prostitution, some engage in legitimate business in the day time and go into prostitution at night while some indulge in it as an auxiliary service. Loy (1984) and Paul (1991) resolved and defined prostitution as an act of offering oneself for hire to engage in sexual action for money. Of course, this definition justifies the activity such that it is voluntary and it is only for a financial reward. Laura (2007) explained that the term sex workers and sex works were coined by sex workers

themselves to redefine commercial sex, not as the social or psychological characteristic of a class of women, but as an income-generating activity or form of employment for women and men. As such, it can be considered along with other forms of economic activity. An employment or labour perspective is necessary if not sufficient, condition for making sex work a part of the mainstream debate on human, women and workers, and worker's right at local, national and international level.

Moreso, the moment it is not done willingly, then it becomes rape while if it is not hired (on temporary basis) then the duration of the contractual agreement becomes questionable since the sex industry is constantly targeted at obtaining financial reward. Those involved in the sex industry have been given different names such as hookers, call-girls, harlots, sluts, and courtesans, however; they are mostly preferred to be addressed as commercial sex workers. This business is facilitated by enticing their potential customers through pornography as Vance(1984) noted that pornography is the theory while sex is the practice.

Sex tourism has become an avenue for the promotion of commercial sex work around the world today. Sex tourism according to Kempadoo and Doezema (1998), is a travel planned particularly with the intension of having sex, generally to a country where prostitution is legalized. Though, Bahago (2013) and NACA (2005) agreed that this practice exposes these sex tourist and prostitute to sexually transmitted infections especially HIV/AIDS. John and Ken(2005) noted that Bangkok is fast emerging as the sex-tourism capital of the world which according to Centre for Disease Control and

Prevention (2013) supports human trafficking, one of the largest criminal industries globally. Sex tourism is also the organization of vacation totake advantage of the lack of restrictions imposed on sex and prostitution by some foreign countries. This according to Akus (2012) promotes human trafficking even though the traffickers are usually highly organized criminal groups, the wide spread role of decentralized criminal network has gained recognition globally while Paul (1993) noted that women suffer by being part of an oppressed group, hence those who fall victim of this social menace are the women and they are principally transported across national borders to either willingly or forcefully engaged in prostitution. This may attract some financial reward both on the short and long-run, however, its social and psychological trauma have deeply affected the prostitutes' health profile, crime rate and the moral values of the citizens.

The term sex work was coined by sex worker activist (Leigh, 1987). Its use became popularized after publication of the anthology; sex work writings by women in the sex industry in 1987 (Leigh, 1987). The work has since spread into much wider use, including academic publications by Labour Unions and by government and inter-governmental agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO). Sex workers usually referred to as prostitutes, have occupied an anomalous position in societies throughout history.

According to Weizer (2000), prostitutes are generally regarded as a social category of women who do not adhere to sexual and other behavioural norms; pitied or despised; they are excluded from mainstream society, their lowly and

marginal position analogous to that of a low caste or minority ethnic group. Outcast status denies them of whatever international, national or customary protection from abuse, is available to others as citizens, women or workers. This social exclusion renders the prostitutes vulnerable to exploitation (Weizer, 2000). The designation of commercial sex work as a special human right issue emphasizes the distinction between prostitution and other forms of female or low status labour, such as cleaning or food serving. By dismissing the entire sex industry as abusive, it also obscures the particular problems and violations of international norms within the industry which are of concern to sex workers.

A lack of international and local protection renders sex workers vulnerable to exploitation in the work place, and they experience harassment or violence at the hands of employers, law enforcement officials, clients and the public (Modo, 2005). The need for worker's protection, including occupational health and safety provisions, is of particular relevance in the current context of HIV/AIDS. Sex workers without right in their place of work are uniquely vulnerable to infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, as they routinely lack the information, materials or authority to protect themselves and their clients.

In his study, Ferlay (1995) points out that women gain financially in some way from pornography and that powerful women have a vested interest in creating pornography. She comments on the edition of feminism that only fight for issues that are of immediate concern to what she sees as their privileged lives. The view that prostitution is a choice for all prostitutes

seems to be a prevalent view even among those that oppose prostitution on religious moral terms.

The abortionist approach declares that, the institution of prostitution itself constitutes a violation of human rights, as kin to the institution of slavery. Infact, the "abortionist" was originally used to describe campaigners against the transatlantic Sahara trade (Onah 2000). As such, no person, even an adult is believed to be able to give genuine consent to engaging in prostitution. Prostitution only persists through the efforts of procurers or pimps, the third parties who induce a woman into prostitution, openly or by means of deceit and coercion, to extort her earning from her, (Modo, 2005). The abortionist approach requires governments to abolish prostitution through the penalization of this third party which profits from the transaction between prostitute and client. The prostitute cannot be punished, as she is the victim of a process she does not control. Without the third party, it is believed that the institution of prostitution will wither away (Modo, 2005).

Theoretical background

This study is premised on the functionalist theory rooted in the work of Davis(1971), which asserts that there are two reasons why prostitution exists. The first is the system of sexual morality that ostensibly condemns prostitutes, but has the unintended consequence of encouraging it. This creates advantages for prostitution in two ways: dividing sex into "meaningful" (with one spouse) and "meaningless" (with a prostitute). This has the effect of encouraging men to go to a prostitute if they want to have "meaningless" sex. Second by defining certain sex acts like anal or oral sex as immoral, not to be indulged in

with one's moral spouse, the moral order encourages men to turn to immoral women for these sex acts. The moral systems in effect create a demand for prostitution.

The second reason for the existence of prostitution is also ironic; prostitution functions to strengthen sexual morality. This acts as a contrast or counterpoint that keeps the respectable citizenry pure. The sex industry encourages men to go to prostitutes for premarital sex, extramarital sex or other immoral sex so that they don't have to pressure or persuade respectable women to engage in the same immoral sex. By thus preserving the sexual morality of conventional women, constituting nearly half of human kind, the level of society's morality should be higher than if any woman engages in the same sexual immoralities. Hence, Davis theory suggests that prostitution exists because the moral system paradoxically encourages it, and in turn serves the important function of preserving feminine virtue.

Forms of Commercial Sex Work

Commercial sex work is divided into different categories. These are:

Call Girls.

According to Weizer (2000) call girls are known to take good care of their health and visit doctors whenever necessary. Almost all of them want their client to use condoms, though they often comply when clients offer a much higher amount of money for condom-free sex, (Weizer, 2000).

Street Prostitution

Those involved in this group are young girls, some of them in their teens. They do their soliciting in limiting but well known areas of the city. These areas include popular places

like well known hotels in the major cities and around girl's hostels in the universities. These sex workers usually dress in skimpy and provocative clothing, regardless of the weather, (Akpan, 2000). Street prostitutes are often called "street walkers" while their customers are referred to as "tricks" or "Johns". The sex is performed in the customer's car, in a nearby alley or in a rented room, (Akpan, 2000).

Child Prostitution;

In the world today, the problem of child prostitution is a frightening reality. Child prostitutes whether occupational or full-time also becomes involved in crime and abuse (Mill, 1997). However, because of the high incidence of sexually transmitted disease such as syphilis, customers are willing to pay for higher prices for children who are considered more likely to be virgins and thus, less likely to be infected, (Tolu, 1997). Ewah (2010) observed that child prostitution involves children between the ages of eight and twelve years. He further stated that at this age, girls often receive their introduction to this activity through their parents and other family members. Child prostitutes generally continued their involvement because they earned a lot of money. Also many seemed to fear rejection by their families if they stop (Margret, 2000).

Sex Tourism

This type is simply described as travelling for sexual intercourse with prostitutes or to engage in their sexual activity, (Mencken, 2009). A specialized agency of the United Nations defines sex tourism as "trip organized from within the tourism sector or from outside, this sector but using its structures and networks with the primary purpose of effecting a commercial sexual

relationship by the tourist with residents at the destination (The World Tourism Organization, 2007).

Etiological factors of Commercial Sex Work

There are reasons why people go into sex work, such as;

Poverty: Because of the disintegration of the family, misery etc., hunger as a form of poverty has forced some parents to sell their children for prostitution. Some girls who engage in sex work do so because they see prostitution as the only means of survival in order to get daily meals. Poverty also lead some girls to sell their bodies for money and as a result become professional sex workers (Onah, 2000).

Personal Life Style: These set of sex workers call it adventure (Ewah, 2010). Many sex workers engage themselves in this business just for the fun of human sexuality and not for economic benefit or frustration (Ewah, 2010).

Unemployment: Unemployment has been identified as one of the reasons why most youths engage in sex work (Onah, 2000). Due to lack of job opportunities for the multitude of graduates, most of them resort to sex work as a means of livelihood and survival. Unemployment has also pushed many young people into sex work and in most cases, against their will (Onah, 2000).

Illiteracy: With the high rate of illiteracy in Nigeria, many parents can neither read nor write. The youths are not left out in this illiteracy problem. This has resulted in their being deceived into believing that in big cities, milk and honey flow, only to be forced into sex work when they get to the city (Ewah, 2010).

Peer Group Pressures : Maria (2007) is of the view that, many young women and girls fall prey to pressure from their peers who they perceive as having succeeded in the prostitution profession. The young girls and women want to make it big, be rich and be recognized by the society.

Conclusion and Recommendations

From the foregoing, it is clear that commercial sex work is a complex social problem that is further complicated by a host of preconceived ideas, prejudices and attitudes that are deeply ingrained in the public mind. This study was undertaken in order to throw more light on the nature of commercial sex work in Nigeria. The study focused on reviewing existing studies on commercial sex work and the underlying factors or conditions that are usually associated with the phenomenon. In the efforts to explain the causes of prostitution in Nigeria, the study invariably came across some etiological factors or conditions that lead women into prostitution. Needless to say that none of the factors highlighted in this study have fully accounted for the existence of prostitution in Nigeria.

From the postulation of the functionalist theorist, prostitution has both positive and negative functions. Prostitution performs positive functions because of the varied and extensive sexual needs of men and the necessity to protect marriage and family institutions in the society. However, the negative effects of prostitution have far reaching implications than the positive ones. Prostitution is not only a necessary vice but constitutes moral, social and medical threats to the well being of the society. But while attempts have been made towards eliminating prostitution, the problem remained unresolved. All attempts by the different organs of government to

legislate prostitution out of existence were largely futile. Thus the issue of prostitution is not lack of severe legislations or sanctions, or lack of regulation in which licenses are issued to prostitutes who want to register with brothels or hotels. Outlawing or closing of prostitutes houses cannot solve the problem. Neither would the expulsion order, demolishing or relocating the prostitutes can change the situation, for whatever policy government adopts the problem will continue to exist. Considering the fact that all efforts and methods to abolish prostitution have failed, this study recommends the possible remedies that can only reduce the problem.

Since it has been found that commercial sex workers reflect pathological backgrounds, government should provide a means of rehabilitating and reforming them. To this end all appropriate means shall be used including religious care, vocational education, guidance and counseling, training, employment and strengthening of moral character. Along with institutional housing, the government with the assistance of welfare agencies should provide facilities for recreation, sports and cultural activities particularly to those commercial sex workers who are advanced in age and young girls who are found to be emotionally disturbed or socially maladjusted. Similarly, since it has been found that family breakdown and divorce leads to prostitution of young girls; couples or parents should be educated to ensure stable marriages and homes.

Formal education of illiterate and unskilled commercial sex workers should be encouraged. Government should encourage the introduction of sex education in the curriculum of secondary schools and tertiary institutions. There should be public enlightenment programmes on HIV/AIDS

and other venereal diseases and the dangers inherent in having indiscriminate sex and engaging the services of commercial sex workers. Through sexual education and public enlightenment we can develop a healthy society and improve the quality of relationships between men and women. Lastly, there is need for the government to create jobs for the citizens so that prostitution in the country can be reduced. If such women are provided with job opportunities, prostitution would be curtailed since some of these girls indulge in deviant acts as a result of frustration.

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