

## **Exposure and Vulnerability of Children living in Unregulated Red Light Areas of Ibadan, Nigeria**

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## Abstract

*Although the practice of commercial sex work is illegal in Nigeria, sex work activities and brothels still thrive in residential neighbourhoods across the country, leaving residents as proximate and direct victims of unregulated sex business. Yet, relatively little research exists on the exposures and vulnerabilities of young adults who spend their childhood in communities that host sex business in the country. To address this, a qualitative study was conducted with people who had children that grew up in the red lights areas, and the challenges of parenting by the participants in environments where prostitution thrived were explored. Fifty-seven interviews were conducted, and a thematic analysis of the narratives was carried out. Findings indicated that the activities of sex work and sex workers in these environments pose a threat to the physical, social, cognitive, moral and educational development of the children. The rate of children's engagement in premarital sex, consumption of illicit drugs, alcoholic intake, stealing, street fighting, and school dropout was found to be a factor of their closeness to sex work and workers in red light areas. These findings have important implications for policy and practice if children's welfare and developmental needs are to be recognised and met.*

**Keywords: Children, exposure, red light areas, sex work, victimisation, vulnerability**

## INTRODUCTION

Nigeria has consistently been rated as one of the worst countries in the world for a child to be born (UNICEF 2018). This unenviable status is premised on the high rate of infant mortality, poverty, child labour and abuse, school dropout, child marriage, child trafficking, and female genital mutilation, which impact negatively on child development. Indeed, these problems have attracted attention and interventions from government and nongovernment bodies at both local and international levels. In addition, scholarly research and social science literature have substantially focused on these menaces with the aim of fostering understanding and engendering intervention (Akpan & Oluwabamide 2010; Ogwumike & Ozughalu 2018). In particular, scholarly works on juvenile delinquency in the country have connected the growth of children vulnerability, victimisation, and offending to the continuous rise in poverty, child labour and abuse, school dropout, child marriage and child trafficking (Aderinto & Etuk 2008). However, ecological and environmental studies and explanations of juvenile delinquency have been quite limited. Specifically, empirical studies have largely ignored the effects of children's exposure within areas where activities of commercial sex workers are highly prevalent and unregulated.

In spite of the specific prohibition of underage prostitution in the Nigeria Criminal Code, the unregulated nature of red light areas – parts of urban areas with high concentration of prostitution and sex-oriented businesses – has raised considerable concern that borders on the vulnerability of children residing in these areas (Aborisade, Adeleke & Oshileye, 2018; Aderinto & Etuk 2008; Ibrahim & Muktar 2016). This concern emerged against the backdrop of reports of a sharp drop in the entry age to sex work in the country (Aderinto 2014; Alobu & Ndifon 2014; Aborisade & Fayemi 2015; Aluko-Daniels 2015). It was reported by the League of Democratic Women (2005) that about 40% of brothel-based commercial sex workers in Nigeria are below the age of 18 years. Though, entry of the underage into commercial sex work in the country is multifactorial, the exposure of children living in red light areas, where prostitution is practiced within residential neighbourhoods, is a potential push factor.

An important factor of children's exposure and vulnerability to juvenile delinquency and abuse is their social environment, as defined within Shaw and McKay's social disorganisation (1942) and Akers' social learning (1985) theories. Therefore, the current study explored the various vulnerabilities that children who spend their childhood in red light areas in Ibadan are exposed to, as a result of the unregulated nature of sex work business in Nigeria. Therefore, the study aims to address the gap in literature on the varieties of exposure, neglect and maltreatment that characterise the childhood of these children in these areas.

Although, it has been widely acknowledged that Nigeria has not recorded substantial successes in protecting children from all forms of abuses and maltreatment (Ogwumike & Ozughalu 2018; Vanguard 2018), the abusive experiences of children, based on environmental factors, have not been well explored.

## **EXPOSURE AND VULNERABILITY OF CHILDREN TO SEXUAL PERVASION AND EXPLOITATION IN NIGERIA**

Despite Nigeria being a signatory to the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and having signed Child's Rights Act, the implementation of the tenets of the Conventions has remained a concern, with the reluctance of many states to enforce the law. Meanwhile, the roles of the state are clearly laid bare in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), especially as regards the protection of the child in Article 34. In this Article, states were mandated to pursue measures that will guard children against all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse (UNICEF 1994). Furthermore, Articles 35 and 36 proclaimed that relevant programmes of national, bilateral and multinational bodies should be channelled towards preventing the abduction, sale and trafficking of children, coercing them to engage in unlawful sexual activity, and all forms of exploitation, such as pornographic performances or prostitution. Provisions of the Articles also posit that all children must have unhindered access to opportunities for self-identification and achieve their self-worth in environments that are safe and supportive to these purposes.

In spite of Nigeria's membership and commitment to these global conventions, abuse of children in the country has continued unabated. For example, a national study on child abuse conducted by the National Population Commission, with the support of UNICEF and US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, indicated that half of all children in Nigeria experience violence (Hillis, Mercy, Amobi, & Kress 2016). It was also revealed in the study that four in ten girls experience sexual violence, while one in ten boys experience sexual violence. In addition, one in six girls and one in six boys experience emotional violence before they attain age 18, and only 4 per cent of abused kids get the needed help (United Nations 2017). The reality of these statistics is indicative of a growing number of underage that are exposed and being made vulnerable to a range of potentially harmful situations or living in difficult circumstances within the country.

Empirical studies have identified widespread poverty, deprivation and struggle for survival as propelling factors exposing children to sexual abuse and

exploitation in Nigeria (Ogwumike & Ozughalu 2018). For instance, several children are subjected to child labour in the form of street trading in order to earn income for family use (Akpan & Oluwabamide 2010). This has often led to such children, especially young girls, being subjected to all manners of sexual abuse, violence and exploitation. Ebigbo (2003) pointed out that such exposure raises the possibility of girls hawking to be victims of rape, enticed into sexually compromising situations and introduced into child prostitution. Similarly, studies have identified street hawking by young girls as well as other forms of child labour as one of the push factors to sexual pervasion and child prostitution (Aderinto & Etuk 2008; Ikechubelu, Udigwe, Ezechukwu, Ndinechi, & Joe-Ikechubelu 2008). This position is further reiterated by UNICEF, citing the 2003 FOS/ILO National Child Labour Survey, which estimated children engaged in child labour in Nigeria as 15 million, with 40% of them being vulnerable to trafficking for domestic and forced labour, prostitution, entertainment, and pornography (UNICEF 2018).

Indeed, extant literature have focused on poverty, low literacy levels, large family size, high school drop-out rates, and rapid urbanisation with deteriorating public services as the push factors fuelling the problem of child prostitution in the country (Ebigbo 2003; UNICEF 2018; Ikechubelu et al. 2008; Aborisade et al., 2019). While this study is not controverting these submissions, the impact of exposure of the children living in neighbourhoods that accommodate the activities of commercial sex has been largely ignored. The continuous growth of underage sexual immoralities and child prostitution in Nigeria, therefore, invites enquiries into the ecological factors determining the vulnerability of children to sex work and other forms of abuses.

## **THEORETICAL ORIENTATION**

As a framework for examining the vulnerability of children that are born and nurtured within the red light areas in Nigeria, two sociological theories were adopted: social disorganisation and social learning. The two theories are considered appropriate as no single theory will be adequate to effectively explain the vulnerability of children to being initiated into delinquent behaviour. Therefore, the environment where they are born and develop (social disorganisation), and contact with delinquent friends, neighbours, and significant others, especially those that are into commercial sex work, are necessary indicators of the theories adopted. The unregulated nature of commercial sex work in Nigeria, and the systematic siting of brothels within poor, highly dense, mixed-use areas in various urban centres across the country, further informed the choice of the two theories.

In their social disorganisation theory, Shaw and McKay (1942) conducted studies that connected the rates of delinquencies to physical characteristics and established relevant evidences about how the neighbourhoods relate to crime and delinquency. According to them, social disorganisation occurs when neighbourhood members fail to achieve united values or to solve mutual problems. They posited that in communities that are affluent, families often fulfil the needs of their youths, while parents effectively supervise their children. On the other hand, in the areas in transition, which are often characterised by strained or even broken-apart families and other conventional institutions (e.g. churches, schools, voluntary association), people moving in and out (transiency) and poverty, social disorganisation prevailed.

Therefore, for such areas, the children receive less social support and proper supervision than needed for them to be able to avoid delinquency. They are, therefore, left to their own devices, as children that grow in slums are free from the type of social control that are available in affluent areas (Ogwumike & Ozughalu 2018); no force is available to guide the type of friendship that is good enough to make them stay off trouble. Empirical studies conducted on the nature of the environments where commercial sex work is practiced in Nigeria have described scenarios that fit the description of the social disorganisation theorists (Aborisade 2002; Ibrahim & Muktar 2016; Adelekan, et al. 2017).

Normally, the environments that accommodate brothels and sex work activities in Nigeria are usually poor, dense neighbourhoods and mixed-use (homes, apartments, retail shops, and even light industry are mixed together). These areas are usually disorganised with rapid population turnover, poor living standard of residents, population heterogeneity, dilapidated building structures, absence of dominant cultural patterns that will be shared by most residents and weak social ties among residents (Aluko-Daniels 2015). Commercial sex work has been found to thrive more in the areas described above in Nigeria. This is based on the general socioeconomic statuses of commercial sex workers in most parts of the country. Considerable research have been able to establish the connection between sex work and poverty in the country (Aderinto 2014; Aborisade & Fayemi 2015; Adelekan, et al. 2017). In addition, research have shown that commercial sex work thrives higher in highly dense environments where sex traders will be able to have access to different kinds of clientele (Christine & Noonan 1987; Aloba & Ndifon 2014). Moreover, the siting of brothels is unlikely in serene highbrow areas as it will be inimical to business patronage and they will be at risk of being apprehended because of apparent higher police presence in such areas.

Characteristics that portend social disorganisation in areas where

commercial sex work thrives include the clientele of sex work dealing in drugs or taking drugs on the streets, public/street fighting, prevalence of criminal activities or some noncriminal activities that pose danger to the neighbourhoods, which are pointers to social control collapse (Gracia & Herrero 2007). In societies that are disorganised, members are made to perceive their neighbourhoods as dangerous. As a result, residents become too afraid to actively participate in activities that will enhance social order, thus, causing them to withdraw from communal life. Shaw and McKay further noted that there are subcultures' delinquencies that are produced in socially disorganised areas. These subcultures are capable of being transmitted from one generation to another through interactions with people in the neighbourhood. Consequent upon this, the emergence of young criminals is prevalent, and crime skills/ values, and traditions are learned from older generations, leading to the reproduction and maintenance of social disorganisation.

The claim of the main proponent of social learning theory, Ronald Akers (1985), is that criminal behaviour is learned through four processes: differential association, definition, differential reinforcement, and imitation. For instance, the primary groups (particularly friends and family), whom individuals are in close contact with, expose them to definitions of behaviour, positively or negatively reinforce a variety of behaviours, and are avenues through which certain behaviours are learned or imitated from others (Akers & Sellers 2004). There is a strong affirmation that one of the most significant facilitators of adolescents' deviant behaviours is peer groups (Ebigbo 2003; Akpan & Oluwabamide 2010). However, not much research attention has been focused on the influence of peers, neighbours and significant others in leading adolescents into prostitution.

The focus of this research is aimed towards the documentation of the exposure and contacts that children have and maintain with sex workers within their neighbourhood. These interactions play an important role in adolescents' entry into prostitution as well as develop deviant behaviours for several reasons. First, just like family and friends, prostitutes that reside in poor, dense neighbourhoods constitute part of the primary groups that adolescents associate with (differential association). Second, sex workers that closely reside with adolescents may impact on the young individuals that making money from having sex with clients is not a bad thing to do; therefore, the practice of prostitution is rationalised. All those that socialise with working prostitutes are most likely going to be exposed to these definitions. For example, females that see their associates with fancy vehicles, expensive fashion items, or spending large amount of money that are possibly gotten from older men, may want to imitate such friends in order to live that kind of *enviable* life. They may yearn for such lifestyles without the knowledge of the risks they may be exposing

themselves to. Also, vulnerable associates of sex workers may perceive material things like flashy cars and money possessed by sex workers as positive reinforcement for prostitution.

As a result, it is hypothesised in this study that living in red light areas increases the odds for children to become involved in sex work. It is also hypothesised that having delinquent friends in the neighbourhood will influence children to use drugs, involve in premarital sex, or expensive lifestyle (via peer pressure), which may in turn lead to sex work in order to get money to maintain the new drug habit and costly lifestyle. Although, this study adopted two different theories to examine these issues, nonetheless, these theories are both related. For example, living in an environment where social disorganisation prevails is a precondition for deviance.

Children that grow up in such areas have the tendency to engage in prostitution by virtue of their association with sex workers. Meanwhile, it is almost impossible for parents to keep their children away from having contacts with sex workers because of the dense nature of such neighbourhoods. Earlier studies have affirmed that such poor highly dense neighbourhoods are arranged in a manner that makes residents to be closely connected to one another (Aborisade 2014; Ebigbo 2003). Therefore, the components of each of these theories, when triangulated via mediating or moderating variables, will engender deeper analysis and provide a stronger projection of the complexity of adolescents' vulnerabilities to sex work, through the environmental influence of red light districts.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Given the unexplored, emotive and complex nature of the research topic, a qualitative approach was adopted for the study. The interviews were adequately structured to ensure that the research questions were addressed, and to enable flexibility for the pursuant of the participants' thought process. The study was carried out within the city of Ibadan, Nigeria. Like all metropolitan cities in Nigeria, there are a number of areas accommodating brothels and other rendezvous where sex trading activities take place. Qualitative data were gathered from five local government areas within the city, specifically residential neighbourhoods with red light zones, like: Mokola roundabout, Bodija- Oju-Irin, Queen Cinema Ekotedo, Havana Avenue Ojoo, Abayomi Iwo-Road, and Adegbayi area Molete.

Throughout the recruitment and interview processes, emphasis was laid on the voluntary nature of the research, while the authors remained alert to signs



of possible distress during the interview. In this vein, though the study set out to explore the vulnerability of children in unregulated red light areas, they were not recruited as participants of the research, because of their age and psychological immaturity, which may impact negatively on them.

The communities of interest were adults who were living within the selected red light districts in Ibadan with their families and at least a child, or that have nurtured a child/children as guardians or foster parents within the areas. As a result of the lack of previous research in the subject area, it was important not to only capture information-rich cases, but also to attempt to engage participants who might relate a range of different experiences, attitudes and beliefs as they pertain to their children/wards. Consequently, maximum variation sampling was used. This is an approach that turns the problem of heterogeneity between individual cases in small samples from ostensible weakness into strength (Creswell 2013). The logic that this method applies is that since diversity is so likely in such a varied sample, any common patterns that do emerge are of considerable value or interest (Patton 1990).

After obtaining a written consent of community heads of the selected areas, especially that of the Landlord/Tenant Association's executives, the researchers made a house-to-house solicitation of participation in the study. For safety and convenience, face-to-face interviews took place in the residents of participants. In all, responses from 57 family men and women living with their children in red light areas were obtained for the purpose of this study.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

Thematic analysis, which is regarded as a method for detecting, examining and reporting patterns within data, was utilised for the analysis of qualitative data gathered for the study. Braun and Clarke (2006) described it as an accessible form of analysis, with parts of its flexibility lying in its ability to be connected to any particular theoretical framework. By the time the researchers became familiar with the data, they engaged in line-by-line coding with the use of NVivo 10 software. The initial descriptive codes were grouped into themes, which were then refined with the use of *constant comparison*. This process continued all through the analysis as researchers compared units of data with the entire data set and emerging theories for the modification of constructs and relationships between them (Glaser and Strauss 1967).

## **RESULTS**

### **Sample Description**

Between July and December 2017, 57 interviews with were conducted with the respondents, who were parents or guardians of children born and raised in red light neighbourhoods – where brothels and commercial sex work activities shared locations with residences of people not associated with sex work. The relationship that participants had with the children being studied were: mother (26), father (18), step-father (3), step-mother (5), and guardian – male (2), female (3). Although, the respondents were 57 in all, more than 57 different experiences of children were shared because some participants had more than one child's experience to share. More women responded positively during the recruitment stage, as 34 (60.0%) of them volunteered to be part of the study as against 23 (40%) men. Although, all participants were living with their children as at the time data were collected, however, not all of them were living with their spouses. Majority of them were married (23), while others were separated (11), single (never-married) parents (10), divorced (5), widowed (3), live-in-lovers (3), and in complicated relationship (2). There were no married couple included in the study as they were evidently going to describe the experience of the same child/children. There were varieties both in terms of the exposure and vulnerability of children to the hazards of sex work activities and victimisation experienced by the children.

## **Description of physical and social environments of study sites**

Observations were conducted in all the five study sites considered to be red light areas in this research. Their consideration as red light areas were premised on the mixed-use nature of the neighbourhoods, which each accommodates at least five brothels, while adjoining residences were either partially or fully used for sex work activities. In all, 37 buildings classified as brothel by function – serving as drinking bars, inhabited by sex workers, offering sexual services to clients within the building – were observed in the five locations within Ibadan. It was observed that most brothels in these areas were normal blocks of flats constructed for residency that were eventually converted into brothels. They were mostly located in the midst of other buildings with no special inscription to suggest they are brothels. Therefore, the structures of the buildings housing the brothels were irregular, while most of them were small with few rooms. As a result of the limited rooms available to the sex workers, some rooms were demarcated with curtains and plywood to serve two or more sex workers.

It was also observed that a high number of sex workers stay in residences that do not serve as brothels in these areas. Therefore, sex work activities were extended beyond ‘designated brothels’ to include apartments rented by sex workers. This may be due to the limited rooms available in the buildings used as brothels. Aside from the brothel buildings being close to residential buildings, sex workers were equally living close to some residents by sharing the same building with them. Concerning the relationship of other residents with sex workers, it was observed that residents that sell different wares enjoyed the patronage of the sex workers and their clientele. Therefore, some of the residents might have stayed long in these areas because of the economic benefits they derived.

## **Preliminary findings**

In order to give context to the themes that follow, it would be useful for the readers to understand the peculiar factors that expose children to deviance and make them vulnerable to being victimised in the red light areas. When participants were asked about these factors, they admitted that they knew only a fraction of possible effects and implications of children’s contact with sex work and sex workers on these children’s developmental process. Participants were much more comfortable in describing their own experiences, but, from a thematic analysis of the narratives, their children’s exposure and vulnerability within the red light areas were apparent. The cases of 126 children were related to this study by their parents/guardians. Majority of them (81, 64.29%) were

between ages 12-16, and they were mainly female (73, 57.94%).

There were a variety of ways that children living in the areas came in contact with sex work and sex workers. A large number of children in the neighbourhoods are given wares to sell through hawking, hence, they are usually patronised by the sex workers and their clients. Some of the children stayed in their parents' shop to assist in the selling of various wares like alcoholic beverages. Also, other children that were not into economic activities within the area, came in contact with sex workers living (and practicing sex work) in the same building with them, living in adjacent buildings, and on the street where sex workers and their clients hanged out at nights. Based on observation, it would be very difficult for children living in the areas visited to avoid contact with sex workers and sex work activities, which appear to dominate the environments. The themes discussed below are: social wellbeing and vulnerability of children living in red light areas, risk perception and exposure of working children, sexual victimisation, exposure to physical violence, and vulnerability to addictive behaviours.

## **SOCIAL WELLBEING AND VULNERABILITY OF CHILDREN LIVING IN RED LIGHT AREAS**

In order to determine the level of vulnerability of the children in red light areas, information were sought from the participants on the social wellbeing of their children. Aside from the socioeconomic status of the parents/guardian, which has been found to be low, the basic social wellbeing of the children was also taken – this is expected to impact considerably on their vulnerability.

**School enrolment and attendance:** Majority of the children (79, 62.70%) were attending secondary schools within the neighbourhoods. Those that attended nursery and primary schools were 22 (17.46%), those that have completed secondary education were 13 (10.32%), while 12 (9.52%) of the children were secondary school dropouts. In spite of the high level of enrolment in schools, a significant number of the parents stated that their children's school attendance rate was below average. They however, attributed the low attendance to the late payment of school fees, thereby, leading to their children being locked out. Other reasons for high absenteeism include ill health, truancy and school refusal on the part of the children, and inability to meet transport cost of children schooling in distant areas.

**Children engaged in jobs earning income:** Child labour was found to be very prevalent in the study sites, with participants owning up to involving their children in economic activities. Although, majority of the children (whose cases

were related to the study) were enrolled in schools, a striking proportion of them (79, 62.70%) were also involved in income earning activities. Out of these 79 children, 47 (59.50%) were into the hawking of food items around their neighbourhoods. This was done in the early morning hours of 5am to 7am, before they went to school, and they hawked from 3pm to 7pm when they returned from school. The remaining 32 (40.50%) joined their parents (mostly mothers) in their shops when they returned from school, to assist in the selling of wares. On weekends, all the 79 children engaged in these jobs all day till late evening.

Based on the observation of the researchers, the children sold food items such as bread, roasted peanuts (in bottles and plastic bags), corn meal, boiled groundnuts, fruits, water (in sachet, plastic bottles and kegs), household goods among others. Some of these children also 'hawked' services like shoe-shining, cleaning of vehicles' windscreens in traffic jam, and using wheelbarrow to ferry goods. The children sold to all manner of customers along the busy red light areas of Mokola Roundabout, Ojoo and Queen Cinema, Dugbe and environs. It was particularly observed that the pattern of selling the wares involved the children entering the premises of the would-be buyers to deliver the goods to them.

Same was observed with the buildings accommodating the sex workers, as they equally patronised the children. This observation formed part of the researchers' enquiry on the risk perception of the parents on such level of their children's involvement in these activities. Mrs Hassan, whose son hawked roasted plantain volunteered:

...we can't help it. We just give the children good orientation on how to protect themselves against what they see, hear or experience in the houses of the prostitutes. Normally, the prostitutes have never been reported to be aggressive towards the children selling items to them. However, the orientation we give the children is to avoid them being corrupted by the sex workers and not to be influenced by what they see in such neighbourhoods...

(Mrs Hassan/47/Mokola Round About)

It appears parents record less success in preventing their children from being influenced by their contacts with sex workers, as many of the parents conceded that the children became very exposed and knowledgeable about sexualities as a result of such contacts.

## **Risk perception and exposures of working children in red light areas**

The information provided by the parents and the researchers' observation revealed that children who worked and maintained high level of contacts with sex workers were exposed to a number of danger in the course of their income-earning activities within the red light areas. The participants' risk perceptions were informed by the concerned children or wards' past experiences and adverse incidents. The parents admitted that their children, who hawked and stayed in their shops, had often taken to premarital sex, consumption of illicit drugs, alcoholic consumption, smoking, pilfering, street fighting, use of vulgar languages, and some dropped out from school. These, the participants believe, were a corollary to the children's repeated exposure to deviances by sex workers and their clients. One of them volunteered:

...some of the children that go hawking items to these people (sex workers) are sometimes asked to leave their wares and go on errands for them. The children are often obliged to honour such request in order to enjoy the patronage. In the process, the children are sent to buy sexually-related items like condom or hard drugs, alcoholic beverages and so on. In some instances, when such children return with the goods, the prostitutes and their clients joke with the children about using condom or drinking sex-enhancing products that they (children) bought for them.

(Mrs Lasisi/41/Ekotedo)

Some of the participants recalled incidents where such children were sent on errands, only to return when the sex worker was already having sexual intercourse with her client. Mrs Idowu confirmed that many children had witnessed scenes of sexual intercourse between sex workers and their clients. She volunteered further:

...there are occasions where children that sell items to them are asked to wait outside their (sex workers') apartments for them to provide sexual service to their client for them to be able pay for the item being hawked...what do you expect from such children? Some of them peep through key holes to watch the sexual scenes...

(Mrs Idowu/51/Queen Cinema)

As stated by some participants, working children were constantly under the risk of being physically manhandled if sex workers or their clients considered the

goods to be bad, or pretend they were bad, in order not to pay for the items. Also, if such goods were sold to the sex workers on credit, they (sex workers) could get violent with the children who kept going to them to demand for payment. Some of the working children were observed to be chatting freely with sex workers in the evenings as they transacted with them, while some children were noticed to run errands for the sex workers in exchange for payment.

## **VULNERABILITIES OF CHILDREN TO SEXUAL DEVIANCE AND VICTIMISATION**

All the participants agreed that children living within red light areas were highly vulnerable to sexual pervasion, intimidation, harassment, and assault of different kinds. They stated that children were exposed to sex or sex related items, languages, gestures, inscriptions, and dressings on a regular basis. Mr Quadri stated that, on several occasions, his children had reported seeing used condoms on the streets, while the very young ones had ignorantly picked such items from the ground, taking them to be balloons to play with. Another participant gave an account of his children's vulnerability to sexual pervasion:

...my children come home sometimes when returning from Arabic school and tell me they saw a man and a woman having sexual intercourse by the roadside and I am always alarmed that these children are too exposed to things above their ages...

(Alhaji Saheed/51/Iwo Road)

Participants also discussed the vulnerability of children to sexual violence, as they affirmed that there have been incidences of sexual harassment or assault perpetrated by sex workers on both male and female children that sell wares or run errands for them. They recounted a number of incidents where underage children were lured by sex workers into their rooms and sexually assaulted. As they stated, such incidents were underreported because the male children, who were usually victims of such abuse, refused to report them to their parents, because they were brainwashed by sex workers into believing that such intercourse are 'privileges' and 'a step into maturity'. However, parents often get to know if such children contract venereal diseases or other sexually transmitted infections as a result of their intercourse with the sex workers.

Participants acknowledged that children's vulnerability to sexual pervasion in the areas brought consequences like prevalence of premarital sex, early entry into prostitution (child prostitution), and unwanted pregnancies. Mrs Fadahunsi elaborated on this:

...there is no way children that grow up here can escape mingling and getting influenced by the prostitutes. While the female children get pregnant too early, male children take to dangerous habits like smoking, drinking alcohol, using vulgar languages, fighting at tender ages and so on. It is not uncommon to see 13 year old girls getting pregnant. Children who are in our neighbourhood no longer see sex as a thing for the adult. They engage in it without fear...our boys are now young fathers with nothing to cater for the children they bring to the world...

Mrs Fadahunsi/46/Ojoo

## **EXPOSURE OF CHILDREN TO PHYSICAL VIOLENCE**

Aside being victims of physical violence as these areas, children were reported to be exposed to a number of physical violence that could impact negatively on their development. They stated that the environments are prone to a lot of violence and violent sceneries, which children cannot help but see. These include violent police raids and arrest of sex workers, clients and other miscreants that hide in brothels. There are also violent fights that sex workers engage in among themselves or with their clients. In some instances, sex workers and their thugs engage the youths of the areas in fights over different issues. One of the participants provided the detail of one of such incidents:

...on one occasion, a customer of theirs died during sexual intercourse and the guy happened to be a resident of the neighbourhood. This caused a lot of chaos between the prostitutes and Mokola boys. Two of the prostitutes died in the process, while many people were injured and properties destroyed. When the police came, they started arresting people indiscriminately on the streets. (Mr. Kasali/38/Mokola Roundabout)

The violent uproars that feature on the streets of these red light areas were reported to often involve the use of dangerous weapons like machetes, local guns, cudgels, sharp objects, woods, broken bottles, knives, and building tools, such as diggers, shovel and acid. The constant sighting of violence with these weapons, according to some participants, makes children and adolescents to develop the habit of deploying similar weapons whenever they are engaged in fights among themselves.



## **EXPOSURE TO ADDICTIVE BEHAVIOURS AND ADDICTIONS OF CHILDREN IN RED LIGHT AREAS**

Accounts of the participants on the vulnerabilities of the children living in the red light areas also indicated that there were addictive behaviours that children developed as a consequence of their interaction with or exposure to sex workers, sex work and clients. The common addictive behaviours that participants identified were alcohol intake and abuse, cigarette smoking, masturbation, premarital sex, pornographic viewing, truancy, aggression, substance abuse, and gambling. The respondents described various levels of children's addiction to these behaviours.

Mr. Moroof offered some details.

...Lateef (his 15 year old son) got very fond of paying the prostitutes for sex. It got to a stage where he was stealing my money or selling things in the house in order to raise some money to patronise the prostitutes. He would even give valuables in the house to the prostitutes in exchange for sex. He also got used to some habits like drinking different kinds of alcohol and drugs to enhance his sexual performance at such tender age...

(Mr. Moroof/49/Mokola Roundabout)

The researchers were equally able to observe traits of addictive personalities in some adolescents, who were begging for money from their friends and associates to buy cigarette and various alcoholic beverages. In addition, a researcher observed a boy of about 12 years old picking up a burning cigarette butt from the ground and smoking it as he walked along the street. There were other observations of children showing traces of addictive behaviours on the streets, in terms of their expression and actions. There were cases of observed underage drinking, smoking cigarette and other illicit substances, sexually assaultive acts of young boys slapping ladies' buttocks and running off, and children peeping to see the sex workers and their clients engage in sexual acts at night, among others. Generally, the respondents reported that children within the neighbourhoods start sexual acts earlier in their lives than what is considered to be normal, while they engage in other acts, like drinking and smoking, earlier than children that grow up in other environments. It was also stated that female children in the neighbourhoods enter into prostitution early in life as a result of their exposure to commercial sex activities.

## DISCUSSION

It is evident from the outcome of the study that the contact children living within the red light areas have with commercial sex workers immensely impact on their exposure to sexuality and engagement in sexual deviance and other delinquency at young age. This lends credence to the postulation of social learning theory on the effects of peers and significant others as important mechanism in adolescents' involvement in deviant behaviours (Akers 1985; Akers & Sellers 2004). Meanwhile, the key factors that facilitate children's contacts with the sex workers are: the low socio-economic status of the parents, parents' engagement in businesses that sought patronage from resident sex workers, and the dense nature of houses in the areas, which hardly support privacy of affairs.

The close structural arrangements of buildings and their dense nature also make it almost impossible for parents and guardians to prevent their children from having contacts with the sex workers. The unregulated nature of commercial sex work in Nigeria makes it to thrive in environments that are usually densely populated, poor, mixed-use, and highly neglected by formal means of social control (Aborisade 2002; Olalere 2013; Aloba & Ndifon 2014). In such environments, social disorganisation prevailed (Shaw & McKay 1942; Christine & Nooman 1987; Aluko-Daniels 2015), giving rise to public display of deviant behaviours that drives the exposure and vulnerability of children to delinquencies. In the case of this study, the exposure of children to sex and physical violence, among other deviances, was quite prevalent.

In addition, the involvement of children in hawking and other economic activities within the neighbourhoods further exposes them to contact with and being influenced by the sex workers and their clients. This position is consistent with the postulations of studies on the vulnerability of children that engage in all forms of labour, especially street hawking (Aderinto & Etuk 2008). The study equally found parents and significant others responsible for facilitating the exposure and vulnerability of their children and wards to delinquent acts by bringing them into physical contacts with sex work and sex workers for economic reasons. Although, school enrolments of children were found to be considerably high, the level of labour that children engage in, before and after school, is capable of derailing their developmental process and drifting them towards delinquency (Ikechubelu et al. 2008; Ogwumike & Ozughalu 2018). Akpan and Oluwabamide (2010) particularly identified children subjected to child labour, especially young girls, as being susceptible to all manners of sexual abuse, violence and exploitation.

Children developed a number of addictive behaviours by virtue of their association with the sex workers and their clientele. This also aligns with the positions of social learning theorists, Akers and Sellers (2004), who hypothesised that contacts with delinquent primary groups will influence children to engage in delinquent behaviours like taking drugs and engaging in premarital sex. The contacts between children and sex workers in the areas visited were found to be prevalent and almost unavoidable. Therefore, adolescents are highly vulnerable to develop and get addicted to behaviours that are highly dominant in the neighbourhoods, due to the open exhibition of such behaviours. In spite of the high addictive behaviours exhibited by children of these areas, there are no concrete programmes on ground by the government and nongovernment bodies to rehabilitate or address the addiction of the adolescents.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, POLICY, PRACTICE AND RESEARCH**

The findings from this research highlight the need for existing theories of child deviance and victimisation to more explicitly consider ecological factors determining children vulnerability to deviant behaviour and victimisation. For example, the social disorganisation theory grew out of research conducted in Chicago by Shaw and McKay, using spatial maps to examine the residential locations of juveniles that engage in deviance with focus on ‘crime prone groups.’ However, ecological factors driving the exposure of juveniles to deviant behaviours and victimisations were not adequately considered. On the other hand, social learning is premised on the idea that association with others (friends and family) contributes to the learning and subsequent acceptance of deviant behaviour. However, evidence from this study suggests significant influence from people outside the immediate social network living within social environments in the learning process of juveniles. Therefore, children specific theories that would consider the ecological factors determining risk exposure to delinquency and victimisation should be developed. This is particularly important in developing countries, where high risk adult behaviours and practices, like sex work, are largely unregulated and social control mechanisms are overly relaxed.

In addition, only a few states in Nigeria have taken concrete steps at legislating on child protection and development issues, even though the country is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1991) and optional protocols, the African Charter of the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1989), and a member of ECOWAS, which has a mandate on child development in the sub-region as contained in the ‘ECOWAS Child Policy and Strategic Plan of Action’ (2009). Meanwhile, for the few states that have policies on child right,

the social context of the abused children is almost invisible. Indeed, there is a law banning the setting up of brothels across the country; however, since the law is hardly enforced, other measures of controlling the activities of sex workers within red light areas should be explored by stakeholders for the protection of children from negative influence, in accordance with Child Rights Act.

Further research needs to triangulate perspectives of sex workers and their clients with that of parents and community stakeholders, like landlords so that vulnerabilities of children to deviance in red light areas can be considered from multiple viewpoints. This will no doubt broaden our understandings around child abuse and victimisation in high risk environments.

## **LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTH**

One of the limitations of this study is the sample's lack of breadth for certain socio-demographic characteristics – age in particular. The accounts of the juveniles and adolescents are not included in this study because ethical approvals could not be obtained to engage them. This study would have been richer with their various experiences in the areas in regard to exposure, vulnerabilities and abuses. However, a key strength of the study is the novelty of perspectives because it directly accesses the experiences of the children's parents, which are vital if we are to understand the wider context and implications of parenting and childhood experiences in red light areas.

## **CONCLUSION**

While previous research have focused on some aspects of children developmental risks, like child labour and abuse, poverty, child marriage, child trafficking and infant mortality; rarely has the exposure and vulnerability occasioned by the environment where children experience their childhood being directly studied. This research has captured rich description of the peculiar vulnerabilities of children that grow up in red light areas in sub-Saharan Africa, where sex work activities are illegal, yet prevalent and unregulated. The perennial failure of government and nongovernment bodies to intervene in the plight of children whose developmental progress are disrupted by their exposure to deviance in these socially disorganised environments inspired the study.

The findings indicate that the activities of sex work and sex workers in these environments pose a threat to the physical, social, cognitive, moral and educational development of the children. Recognition of the predicaments of parents and provision of support would reduce the level of child labour, which exposes children to deviance and increase school enrolment. Rehabilitation

programmes for children addicted to drugs and other related substances should be established, while parents and significant others should be incorporated into the process of reintegration. This would promote an important double-gain, where children addicted to deviant behaviours will be rehabilitated and their parents and guardians supported to handle undue exposure and vulnerabilities of other children to deviance in red light environments.

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