

Socio-Economic Effect of Commercial Sex Work in Abuja Suburb: A Survey of Selected Brothels in Mararaba, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Abolitionists argue that the commodification of sex denigrates womanhood and therefore condemn every sexual relationship that centers on economic gains. Sex rights workers group however contend that in the face of economic challenges and sexual liberalism, the trade should be regulated rather than abolished. This paper examined commercial sex proliferation in Abuja suburb, categories, as well as the contributions this informal sector performs in the socio-economic development of Abuja which has been necessitated by increased family expectations and high rate of unemployment in Nigeria. The feminist, Marxist, and social strain theories were reviewed and social strain theory which the work was framed on showed that family pressure, unemployment and poverty are the major reasons why women engage in commercial sex work. A total of 181 persons from 5 randomly selected brothels formed the population of the study, of which 100 persons were randomly selected as the sample of the study. In-depth interviews as well as questionnaires were used to sample opinions of respondents and data obtained were analyzed qualitatively. It was found out that commercial sex trade have increased many family incomes and reduced the rate at which sexual crimes may have increased, owing to various categories of services rendered by sex workers. However, respondents expressed worries over stigmatization, police harassment and the Nigerian government's inability to address their plight as a right group. The study recommends that government should provide job opportunities and skill empowerment for people who are willing to leave the profession and officially legitimize the trade so as to adequately control the sector and integrate it as part of the GDP of the country.

Keywords: Brothels; Migrants; Prostitution; Suburban; Abuja, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Prostitution as a practice has over the years been identified in the history of mankind. Available evidence from our pre-historic relatives suggests that sexual liberalism and prostitution exists prior to the monetization of sex. "Prostitution has been noted in Bonobo Chimpanzees behavior based around access to food and gift and in Penguins in regards to access for suitable stones for nest building" [1]. Often described as the oldest profession in the world, it dates back to 2400 BC in Ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Rome, Greece and Pre-Columbia Peru. During the Middle Ages and throughout the nineteenth century, prostitution was tolerated as a necessary evil, as legal brothels operated in much of Europe and was an important source of tax revenue. As dangers of venereal disease became known, some cities shut down their brothels, but other cities required regular medical examination of their brothel prostitutes [1].

Contemporary information and communication technologies of

the 21st century have transformed prostitution with social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Tweeter, Whatsapp, Imo, Badoo, Wechat, etc., creating ease in electronic sex. The proliferation of online dating sites, online sex; where people pay to view and choose from an array of nude women pictures are innovations which have broadened sexual liberalism and the emergence of a 21st century commercial sex work. This is further reinforced by the increasing financial demands on the unemployed female urban dwellers by their family members in rural areas. The commercialization of sex would not be possible without clients willing to pay for it. Despite this essential fact about commercial sex, there are very few studies of why men choose to become customers. The implicit message from this lack of studies is that it is acceptable for men to have sex with women, but abnormal for women to demand money in exchange for sex. On the motivation why men choose to pay for sex, Weitzer [2] outlined them to include:

i. The desire to have sex with someone with a certain physical appearance (age, race and body type).

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- ii. The lack of a sexual partner or dissatisfaction with a sexual partner, including a desire to have unconventional sex that the partner does not share.
- iii. The thrill of having sex with a prostitute.
- iv. The desire to have sex without having to make an emotional commitment.

Closely linked to these is the prevailing wave of unemployment in Nigeria. Unemployment is steadily on the increase. Productive firms which ought to create jobs are winding up owing to unfavorable economic atmosphere. Data from National Bureau of Statistics (2016) [3] revealed that unemployment increased by 1,44,918 persons between Q4 2015 and Q1 2016 (increase of 5,18,000 between Q3 and Q4 2015). Implicitly, the country was unable to create the 1.5 million jobs the Federal Government of Nigeria promised upon assumption of office in 2015 as required between Q4 in 2015 and Q1 in 2016 [3]. This has further increased the level of vulnerability of unemployed women in the hands of relatives, pimps and madams, big sister figures and friends, with promises of employment in the cities. Irrespective of this fall out, commercial sex portrays inequality in the means of production (money or non-monetary values) between the buyer (male client) and seller (the prostitute).

Conflicting ideologies of prostitution

There are two conflicting ideologies of prostitution. They are the Abolitionist (criminalization), and Sex Workers Rights groups (decriminalization). Abolition of commercial sex work especially in the works of Raymond [4], Hayes-Smith and Shekarhar [5] is hinged on the explanation that the term extols prostitution, a profession which contravenes the moral structure of the society and challenges marriage institution. Raymond [4] argued that prostitution reduces a woman's self-worth and portray her as an object which can be bought with money. Hard-line abolitionists on the other hand posit that Nigeria should emulate Sudan by attaching death penalty on prostitution. The abolitionist idea is in line with the United Nations 1949 [6] Convention position that "prostitution and the accompanying evil of the trafficking for the purpose of prostitution are incompatible with the dignity and worth of the human and therefore, endangers the welfare of the individual, the family and the community" [UN, 1949: Resolution 317(iv)] [6].

Although, Nigeria has adopted a hybrid prohibitionist-decriminalization scheme concerning prostitution [7]. Sex workers' rights group have called for absolute de-criminalization, and argued for the regulation of commercial sex because commercial sex work is a legitimate occupation, and the decision to enter the industry is a matter of individual freewill, and as a result, it is wrong to criminalize individuals' freewill [8]. Hence, the prohibition of commercial sex work is an infringement on the rights of consenting adults to personal liberty and association, because women should have the freedom to make decisions about their body, and any attempt to infringe on this amount to subjugation of women and approval of existing patriarchal order.

Mandelbaum [9] agree that lax regulation and over criminalization of prostitution can lead to stigmatization of sex workers, increase in sexual violence, spread of diseases and other negative effects for the society. Sex workers rights group contend that a regulated commercial sex industry will reduce the proliferation of brothels, underage sex workers, and create employment for young, voluntary and healthy class of women that will contribute to national economy

through tax payment. For instance, the United States of America's State of Nevada, Netherlands, and Germany are among countries which legalize and regulates commercial sex work. In addition, UNDP and UNAIDS Commission recommends decriminalization of brothels and procuring [10,11].

In spite of the contributory effects of commercial sex trade in meeting socio-economic needs of many dependent households, the trade is still demonized by many, especially men who patronize its services, hence this study is set to critically assess and analyze its socio-economic impacts in the suburb of Abuja. However, Abuja which is the capital territory of Nigeria accommodates many ethnic-nationals and foreigners. Above all, it accounts for high, middle and low socio-economic status individuals who can be found in many cities of the world. Unfortunately, many of these individuals of various socio-economic statuses are perceived to have some sexual interactions between opposite sex of preferred classes. Commercial sexual services are rendered to males on the basis of status; and incomes generated are in most cases remitted to dependent relatives in rural areas or invested into certain formal sector which contributes to societal development of such given areas. It is observed that girls of high socio-economic background, working class and even undergraduates are involved in this trade, also unemployed females gets busy with this trade as a means of survival.

Conceptual issues

There is no globally accepted classification of commercial sex workers. For the purpose of this study, we shall outline the prominent categories. Harcourt and Donovan [12] identified at least 25 types of sex work in relation to worksite, principal mode of soliciting clients, or sexual practices, among them are the following:

- **Escort worker:** They contact their clients by phone through hotel staff. They are relatively expensive due to the expected low customer turnover and exclusive home service which they offer to their clientele base.
- **Club, pub and dance hall workers:** As the name implies, this category of commercial sex workers solicit for customers by hanging around club houses, bars, and dancing halls.
- **Beer girls:** These are girls employed to sell and promote goods in bars and pubs. These girls engage in commercial sex with customers as a means of augmenting their income.
- **Opportunistic:** These categories of women may deny the prostitute toga, because they occasionally indulge in sex for favours, more especially with wealthy clients.
- **Femme libre:** This consists of single or divorced women who trade sexual services for gifts which they may convert to cash in the long run.
- **Beach boys, bumsters, and gigolos:** They are young men and boys contracted by "sugar mummies" for various social purposes including sex.
- **Survival sex:** This type of prostitution is common in derivative situations such as hunger and war torn areas. Here, people offer sex in exchange for food and security which may be the currency rather than physical money.

Other types of prostitutes include:

- **Part timers:** These classes of women usually have other means

of livelihood aside prostitution, but engage in sexual relation with echelons of the society for financial or other benefits.

- **The student class:** They are prevalent in tertiary institutions and their clients include lecturers with whom they trade sex for marks, and a network of middle and upper class men.
- **The independent call girls:** This category of sex workers make judicious use of social media and stay away from the prying eyes of the general public in soliciting for clients.
- **Street walkers:** They are also referred to as Night Walkers. Street Walkers are found in highbrow areas and streets at odd hours, and charge more compared to brothel employee.
- **Brothel employee:** Weitzer [13] explained that the prices they charge are “moderate” and brothel workers endure “moderate exploitation” since they have to give part of their earnings to the brothel owners.
- **The Doorway worker:** Is synonymous with brothel employee in that they stay in brothels and entices passersby to enter houses of prostitution by prominently displaying the women in doorways [13]. Brothel employees are the prevalent type of sex trade in the study area.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study is Neo-Marxist Feminism. Feminist argue that social structure entrenches patriarchal values which distinguishes the male and female child in the course of early socialization. The male child is nurtured to be active while the female child is trained to be passive; this is institutionalized by an existing patriarchal system which pervades every social institution. Feminist assert that society’s patriarchal system encourages prostitution, while prostitution reinforces patriarchy by propagating beliefs that oppress women in many domains of their lives. Neo-Marxist feminists regard commercial sex as the commodification of labor in accordance to the ideas of Karl Marx. Hence, the commercialization of sex is not far from the labor process, as what women experience on daily basis are much like what every day laborer goes through. Because of the increased level of economic inequality that exists between men and women, women are found to be susceptible to jobs and positions in society that are less than desirable [14]. Unfair labor conditions force women into commercial sex trade. Similarly, anti-prostitution law which regards commercial sex workers as prostitutes while exonerating their male clients are manifestations of prevailing socio-economic inequality.

METHODOLOGY

This research was carried out in 5 randomly selected brothels in Mararaba, a suburb of Abuja. The total population of the study is 181. Due to the sensitive nature of the research, and in order to ensure anonymity and generate adequate response, the brothel

names are withheld, and presented in alphabetical form (Brothel A, Brothel B, Brothel C, Brothel D, Brothel E) (Table 1).

For the quantitative data, a total of 100 questionnaires instrument which formed the sample size using a simple random technique were distributed to respondents, 80 questionnaires were returned representing 80 percentage of the research population (Table 2).

The study adopted quota sampling technique to allocate questionnaires and simple random sampling to choose respondents. Quota sampling was used to improve the representation of subset of a population, thereby ensuring that no group is over represented. Questionnaires were given to 20 respondents irrespective of the total population of people in each brothel under study.

The fieldwork was carried out between January, 2018 and April, 2018. Each brothel has a leader also known as a chair-lady whose position is based on longevity in the brothel. IDI was conducted on the chair ladies and was structured to allow the researchers explore their views in relation to the issue under investigation. The consent of the respondents was sought and there was no inducement of any sort. There was no provision for the name or any other personal information of the respondents and the aim of the research were made clear to them. Data generated from questionnaires were presented in simple percentage, while IDI was recorded with the participant’s permission and analyzed using content analysis. IDI responses were transcribed. Verbatim reports were utilized to illustrate some points in the interpretation of results. Quotations from participants were arranged in the order of: gender, age and marital status.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Majority (56.25%) said unemployment forced them into prostitution, while 43.75% said family and peer pressure caused them to venture into commercial sex (Tables 3 and 4).

According to one:

“I joined voluntarily because I had to survive in this city (Female, 39, divorced)”.

On her part, another commercial sex worker said:

“My friend introduced me to runs (commercial sex work), and I see money

Table 1: Population of brothel residents (Source: Field study, 2018).

Brothel	Population
Brothel A	35
Brothel B	41
Brothel C	33
Brothel D	35
Brothel E	37
Total	181

Table 2: Presentation of questionnaire distribution (Source: field study 2018).

Brothel	Number of Questionnaires Distributed	Number of Questionnaires Returned	Percentage (%) Returned
Brothel A	20	17	21.25
Brothel B	20	12	15
Brothel C	20	18	22.5
Brothel D	20	18	22.5
Brothel E	20	15	18.75
Total	100	80	100

because I am fine and I get plenty customers. So, I send money to my people for village (Female, 27, single)".

Many IDI respondents acknowledged that although unemployment, family and peer pressure forced them into the trade, they do not wish to be in it for long if they are provided with better job opportunities. This shows that "poverty is the leading catalyst for

Table 3: Socio-demographic variables of respondents in selected brothels (Source: Field study, 2018).

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Age of respondents		
20-30	44	55
31-40	28	35
41+	8	10
Total	80	100
Sex of respondents		
Male	3	3.75
Female	77	96.25
Total	80	100
Marital status of respondents		
Married	5	6.25
Divorced/widowed	14	17.5
Single (Unmarried)	61	76.25
Total	80	100
Occupation		
Unemployed	48	60
Underemployed	19	23.75
Gainfully employed	3	3.75
Student	10	12.5
Total	80	100
Level of education		
Primary/Basic education	13	16.25
Secondary/High School education	44	55
University/Tertiary undergraduate	11	13.75
NCE/OND/HND/First degree (B. Sc)	12	15
Total	80	100

Table 4: Reasons for going into Commercial Sex (Source: field study 2018).

Response	Brothel A	Brothel B	Brothel C	Brothel D	Brothel E	Total	Percentage (%)
Unemployment	14	2	7	12	12	45	56.25
Family/Peer-pressure	3	10	11	6	3	35	43.75
Total	17	12	18	18	15	80	100

Table 5: Challenges faced by commercial sex workers (Source: Field study, 2018).

Response	Brothel A	Brothel B	Brothel C	Brothel D	Brothel E	Total	Percentage (%)
Bribery to police	4	3	4	3	0	14	17.5
Police harassment for sex	2	4	4	5	2	17	21.5
Fears of contracting sexual infectious diseases	5	3	4	1	4	17	21.25
Family pressure	6	4	7	6	9	32	40
Total	17	14	19	15	15	80	100

entering the world of prostitution in Nigeria" [15]. Bamgbose [16] further argued that the widening gap between the rich and poor is producing more potential exploiters for the sex industry and the family members often condone prostitution as long as it is bringing an economic benefit into the household. In the words of an IDI respondent:

"My mother is a widow and I have 5 siblings, most of them are in school and I have to hustle to support them. (Female, 32, single)".

Another commercial sex worker said:

"I came to Abuja with a female friend, but she got a job because she knows somebody who is connected, I joined because I don't know anyone to connect me with a job (Female, 27, single)".

Majority (40%) of the respondents said family pressure is the major reason why they are commercial sex workers and thus constitute the greatest challenge they faced. This is followed by constant police harassment for sex and fear of contracting sexually transmitted diseases which constitutes 21.25% each. Only 17.5% of respondents averred that bribery paid to the police is their major challenge to them (Table 5).

According to one:

"My family members in the village pressure me a lot for money....They call me all the time to send money to them for one thing or the other because they believe that I am doing a government work here in Abuja (Female, 32, single)".

Another added:

"My greatest challenge is police harassment... they take all the money we hustle for, and can lock us up if we don't settle (bribe) them (Female, 27, Divorced)".

Majority (65%) of the respondents averred that commercial sex work should be legalized. This argument is hinged on the argument that legalization will reduce stigma and the prevailing police extortion they are subjected to. However, 35% disagreed with the call for legalization. In the words of an interviewee (Table 6) [1,17]:

"I have 2 female children in the village... I would not want to see them like this...it should not be legalized for now because many young girls may think it's the best way to be self-employed (Female, 39, Widowed)".

Table 6: Support for legalization of commercial sex work (Source: Field study, 2018).

Response	Brothel A	Brothel B	Brothel C	Brothel D	Brothel E	Total	Percentage (%)
Yes	15	10	15	3	9	52	65
No	2	2	3	15	6	28	35
Total	17	12	18	18	15	80	100

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

For centuries, moralists have argued that prostitution downgrades the dignity of womanhood and negates the morality of the society in general. From the expository thus far made, we can deduce that “both men and women enter prostitution either professionally or temporarily as relative amateurs, for economic and monetary reasons”. All the chair-ladies who were interviewed opine that men are hypocritical in their assessment of brothel sex workers, because they demonize the trade at day time and return as regular customers at night, while they maintain emotional based relationships with their female partners for sexual gratification.

Commercial sex workers said that they make just enough money to cater for the immediate needs of their relatives in the rural areas. They contend that a ban on red light districts may force many of their colleagues to venture into criminal activities as a result of the poor employment situation in Abuja. Aside from unemployment, other reasons for joining the trade include unrealistic family expectations, peer influence and declining morality. To this end, it is important to heed the previously described postulation that if unemployment rate goes up, the legitimate earning opportunities decline and crime (and deviance) tends to increase because the cost of crime goes down for the unemployed workers. Hence, if nothing is done to reduce the growing rate of youth unemployment, especially female unemployment in particular, commercial sex workers will be on the increase in Abuja suburbs as they seek to make ends meet.

Considering that commercial sex is a deviant behavior, all the chairladies interviewed called on Nigerian government to accept commercial sex trade as another form of deviant means of livelihood and should be treated in the category of online gambling, which was hitherto regarded as a deviant behavior but have been harnessed and regulated in line with global standard. Furthermore, commercial sex workers regard themselves as victims of life’s circumstances and urged the society to appreciate their contribution towards easing sexual pressure experienced by men who cannot afford to keep regular emotional relationship with women.

In view of the negative perception of commercial sex work in Nigeria, this study contends that it may be impossible to completely eradicate the trade due to prevailing harsh socio-economic realities. Therefore, law enforcement agencies should recognize the rights of consenting adults to trade sexual relations as they wish, anything contrary to this position is tantamount to denial of fundamental human right and discrimination of women in a patriarchy structured Nigerian society. Again, there is need to decriminalize, de-stigmatize, regulate the trade and provide commercial sex workers with medical and social benefits in line with emerging global best practices obtainable in New Zealand, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Denmark, France, Germany and Greece. Decriminalization will reduce the constant exploitation of sex workers by local law enforcement agents and eliminate stigmatization. This paper also recommends that relevant Nigerian government agencies such as

social welfare boards, ministry of justice, ministry of labor, and ministry of women affairs must:

- i. Create employment opportunities for every citizen irrespective of their socio-cultural background.
- ii. Provide skill acquisition programmers and interest-free take-off loans for vulnerable women.
- iii. Reduce the rate of gender inequality in Nigeria labor market.
- iv. Create attractive economic opportunities for women as a way of increasing their earning power and reducing stigmatization.
- v. Partner Non-Governmental Agencies and religious organizations in creating awareness on the dangers of commercial sex trade.
- vi. Sensitize rural dwellers on the need to discourage incessant and unrealistic demands from their female children; this measure will certainly reduce unnecessary social strain and prostitution, hence promoting the dignity of womanhood.

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