

Is Commercial Sex Work Really Work in Nigeria? The Motivations, Dimensions and Policy Implications

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ABSTRACT: *The sex industry is one of the non oil industries that are booming in recent times especially in Nigeria. The industry has a lot of prospects in view of the fact that youths particularly the women aged 15-35 years who hardly find legitimate jobs engaged in transactional sex for money. In Akwa Ibom State, it is common knowledge that such trade exists. Sex workers are commonly found in places like night clubs, dance bars, brothels and red light streets like Maitama, Ibom Plaza and Ikpa Road. This study therefore sought to unravel the meanings with which commercial sex workers attached to their work; the motivation, dimensions and the implications of the sex trade. The study adopted purely qualitative approach with the use of in-depth interview and content analysis. Twenty (20) commercial sex workers participated in the study. Some commercial sex workers considered sex work as work in view of their disadvantaged economic positions and lack of alternative economic engagement. Beyond the economic consideration, many of them were aware that sex work has legal, socio-cultural and moral implications; and since sex works infringes the country's laws, offend societal norms and values, and erodes the moral standards, it is not considered really as work by people generally in Nigeria. In view of this, the study suggested legitimate jobs to be provided, training programmes to be instituted, rehabilitation to be executed and prosecution to be implemented for those caught in the web of sex trade.*

KEYWORDS: Sex work, work, motivations, dimensions and implications.

INTRODUCTION

The 1970s and 1980s were eras for strong advocacy particularly from COYOTE (Call Of Your Old Tired Ethics) championing a new and positive image for prostitution (Bullough and Bullough, 1978; Tannahill, 1980; Otis 1985; Schur 1984; and Lerner 1986). The cardinal crusade

of this movement was to advocate for a repeal of all existing prostitution laws and the need to reconsider prostitution as a credible occupation in the United States of America. This was in view of the fact that, COYOTE believed that, prostitution is work; and a voluntary work that should be practiced unperturbed. As argued by the President of COYOTE, Dolore French, in Henkin (1988:3):

a woman has the right to sell her sexual services just as much as she has the right to sell her brains to a law firm where she works as a lawyer, or to sell her creative work to a museum when she works as an artist, or to sell her image to a photographer when she works as a model or to sell her body when she works as a ballerina. Since most people can have sex without going to jail, there is no reason except old fashioned prudery to make sex for money illegal.

The above excerpt calls for the need to re-evaluate contextually the meaning of the term work, as it has been subjected to quite a number of ideological and conceptual interpretations (Weber, 1947; Akpala, 1982 and Ogunbameru, 2000). From a lay man's interpretation, work can be seen as activities engaged by a person in order to eke out a living. Seeing work in this sense is to regard it as paid employment primarily engaged for economic benefits and rewards. Nevertheless, Ogunbameru (1992) sees work differently, as those activities carried out by man in order to create something of value to the society. Something of value in this sense can either be goods or services. Arguably, what is of value could be culturally determined by the people or society. It is suggestive therefore, that society determines what constitute work based on its beliefs, values and normative principles. Hence, the concept of work goes beyond economic (objective) dimension to a more socio-psychological (subjective) domain.

In Nigeria, many people regard and choose certain occupations as work; such as teaching, farming, trading, fishing, (law) lawyer, and (medicine) doctor because it is honourable and rewarding etc. In view of this, regarding sex work as work requires critical assessment and re-examination of the avocation sociologically, and within labour and employment context. Commercial sex work in this context refers to the exchange of sexual intercourse for money or the commercialization of sexual intercourse as a direct result of the desire by some persons to offer themselves as object of sexual satisfaction and the readiness of others to patronize such services for some form of satisfaction. Put differently, transactional sex. The practitioners of this occupation are known with different parlance such as: Olosho, Ashawo, Okpeke, and Akpara in different Nigerian societies. They are also referred to in English nomenclatures as: Hookers, Call-girls, Harlots, Prostitutes, Sluts, Run-girls, Courtiers and Pimps.

Historically, commercial sex work is as old as human beings; and is regarded as one of the oldest profession of mankind (Alobo and Ndifon, 2014). Sex work thrives in so many cultures and civilizations either secretly or openly depending on the limit such cultures permit. The Bible has recorded history of this trade and practice in ancient Israel (Gen 38:15-30 and Joshua 2:1-24). It is also noted that despite its practice in Israel, it was only permissible among singles as it carries some form of reproof and sanctions among the married (Gen, 38:24).

Over the years the perception in many societies such as those in Western and European Countries have changed about the practice, as the industry laws have been relaxed or amended to making commercial sex a recognized means of livelihood. Thus, Hughes (2004) observed that the legalization and recognition in some societies made sex-work as normal an occupation as any

other societies an accepted profession of human endeavours. This development has brought with it a change in its nomenclature from prostitution to a more appealing name - commercial sex work. In this light, sex work has now become an occupation especially for the girls in countries like Netherland, Brazil, and Norway. This is so as the profession serves as one of the sources of revenue for government as taxes are paid to the government by the practitioners (Aday, 1990).

In view of this, sex work is noticeable to be in the rise in Nigeria and the most common places where sex workers are found include brothels, hotels, motor parks and busy streets. Particularly in large cities like Lagos, Port Harcourt, Oshogbo, Kano and Uyo. It is also common knowledge that young female students (undergraduate) and the unemployed graduate girls use sex-work to earn income and for sustenance. Nevertheless, the hard economic situation faced by the unemployed may have been one of the reasons for the steady rise of the trend; this speaks volume and has policy implications for the handlers of governance. This is so because with the steady rise in the country's unemployment statistics from the National Bureau of Statistics, may lead to the corresponding rise in sex work occupation if nothing is done about it.

Literature reveals scanty research on sex work and sexuality in Akwa Ibom State. The available ones only concentrated on the causal factors and the effects (Akpan, 2000; Oden, 2021 and Onah, 2000). In addition, they adopted quantitative approach in their investigations. But this study is a deviation from previous ones as it seeks sociological, cultural, legal and moral interpretations to the sex trade and the associated implications. The study adopts a qualitative approach in its investigation. It depths also covers the examination of the motivations and dimensions of the trade. By so doing, bridge the lacunae not covered by previous studies.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to investigate if sex-workers actually regard sex-work as work in Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria.

Specific objectives include:

1. To find out if commercial sex-workers see sex work as work in Akwa Ibom State.
2. To examine the motivations for commercial sex work among the sex-workers.
3. To investigate the dimensions with which commercial sex-work take place in the state.
4. To assess the implications associated with sex-work and how it affects public policy.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sex work: An overview.

Commercial sex work as earlier stated, has its historical and cultural foundations. Its practice is as culture permits. Every culture adopts its own standards and attitudes as regards sex work. The term sex work was coined by Carol Leigh in 1978 since then the usage of the term has stealthily been adopted by the academia, labour unions, government and inter-governmental agencies on global discourse relating to prostitution. Leigh used the term in order to push for the sexual freedom of women and sex workers' rights; herself a sex worker and an activist in view of the economic significance associated with the work. Commercial sex is basically sex for money and other economic gains.

As reported by the National Behaviour Survey (NBS, 2004), commercial sex work has indeed become complex in different ways as there are male sex workers, who have sex with women or men for commercial reasons. Commercial sex has particularly taken a worrisome and indeed despicable turn in Nigeria and African continent in general. This is so, as the trade has taken international dimension through trafficking in persons across international frontiers; particularly to Italy and some parts of Europe resulting in gross violation of human rights.

Ikpe, (2000) equally stated that, commercial sex has become a lucrative business in Nigeria especially among the youths. Onah, (2000) also observed that about 31 percent of sex workers are students particularly in Nigerian institutions. He discovered that there are different forms of sex workers, those that stay in the brothels, those that stand on the road side, and those that operate from home. As noted by Wilson and Roy (1963), the existence of houses for sex workers is a sign of unhealthy government and of social conditions that are unwholesome for youths and adults. Ogunkan, Omoruan, and Fawole (2010), added that the sex trade is a menace to the community and the presence of large number of commercial sex workers has now become a major social issue.

Commercial Sex: The Motivating Factor

Commercial sex is as old as the world itself. It is an age long practice which in modern times is now carried out in the open without shame. Some women have even glamorized the trade and some see it as a very lucrative business especially those that managed to travel out of the country to other climes where sex work is legalized. For many people, economic condition is a key factor to this trade. For instance, the Sydney Morning Herald (SMH) reported in 2013 that an increase number of people especially single mothers were turning to sex work and lap-dancing in Australia in order to make ends meet, due to cuts in parenting welfare payments (SMH, 2021). In other words, economic factor is the central motive constraining people to live in homes outside-home.

Dworkin (1981) succinctly puts that, sex work serves as a motivating factor in getting money easily for up keeps. Some have to pay for their rent, food and day care of their children. Others must pay for drug abuse, while others want an extra week's holiday abroad or elsewhere. As further observed by Dworkin (1981), prostitution frequently provides the "best" opportunity for easy money, when they need money for a date of night out, they obtain it within an hour through sexual transaction with a client. A 2015 study among sex workers in the UK found out that, one in 20 students were involved in sex work as students find themselves facing increased debt burdens by the time they graduate. Sex work then becomes a means of mitigating this issue and also as covering cost (Sangar et al 2015). Other people choose sex work because it offers them economic opportunity. Sangar et al (2015) stated that sex work is seen as a form of labour which students' can exploit for material gain because of their attributes in terms of sexuality, looks, skills, personality and attitude.

Kinsley (1976) maintains that, since the economic means are distributed unequally between classes but female attractiveness is not, some women of lower economic means can exploit their attractiveness for economic gain. Moreso, people in other vulnerable or precarious situations such as drug or alcohol dependency, abusive relationships, homelessness, unemployment coming to terms with their sexual and gender identity may also engage in sex work for survival, experimental and/or lifestyle purposes (Sangar et al 2015). Kinsley (1976) noted that some

women became sex workers because of sexual curiosity and 68 percent consider their line of work as part of their sexuality. Majority of women gave sexual curiosity as a reason for entering sex work while many had great interest in sex before becoming sex workers.

Illiteracy and Poverty:

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 flows only to be forced into sex work when they get to city (Ewah, 2010). The first rationalization for the proliferation of prostitution has been poverty, especially if the lady comes from a poor background. Young ladies whose parents are incapable of taking care of their siblings tend to go into such venture (sex work) so as to make ends meet and take care of the family. According to Onege (1978), prostitution is largely motivated or caused by poverty. It is a state of inadequacy and want of copiousness. This was corroborated by Aloba and Ndifon (2014) who were of the view that, poverty is one of the major reasons that cause prostitution. Marx (1964) and Bonger (1969) also maintained that prostitution is caused by poverty, and therefore personal disorganization inherent in capitalism. In a similar token, Lenski and Lenski (1978) contend that economic factors were closely and clearly the chief cause of its high incidence. Poverty is the system that communizes and dehumanizes the bodies and person of women and children of both sexes for the use and profit of men.

To this effect Bierstedt, (1974) found that, bad conditions drove many women into prostitution and sometime successfully tried to amend these conditions. The profession has been in many cases a transitory one. Many women, no doubt fall through vanity and idleness, love of dress, love of excitement. But by far the large proportion are driven to sex work by cruel biting poverty and unemployment opportunities. From this, it can also be deduced that idleness is a pointer to being lazy which virtually leads to poverty. And it is glaring that laziness can lead to prostitution that is seen as an easy business that generates fast money. Youths of now a day do not want to suffer to make a living and this is affecting the society. They see prostitution as a free business one can do without stress. Otengwo (2002) observed that many ladies turn themselves to prostitutes just for the sake of money and they have unaccountable ways of seducing those they perceived as rich people; meaning that most of the ladies today do not believe in the philosophy of hard work but rather prefer to sell themselves instead to get what they want.

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. Onah, (2000) noted that unemployment has pushed many young people into sex work and in most cases against their will.

Dimensions of Sex Work

The proliferation of brothers and hotels for sex workers in most urban centres is not only noticeable but also the increasing number of sex workers rings in the continent is palpable (Adesina, 2001 cited in Ogunkan, Omoruan and Fawole, 2010). It is so prominent that Nigerians refer to it as “Italian connection”, “Sex working” “Ashawo business” etc. Harcourt and Donovan (2005) undertook a review of 681 articles on prostitution from 1996-2004 to identify the dimensions of prostitution and the social context in which it occurs. They however noticed that every country and every region have a different composition to its sex industry; and this is

shaped by history, social and economic factors, legal frame work and policing practices. About 25 types, forms and dimensions of sex work were identified by them and grouped into direct and indirect.

(a) The direct dimension of sex work consist of the following:

- **Street prostitution:** Here clients are solicited on the street, parks or other public places, and services rendered in street corners, vehicles, or short stay premises.
- **Brothel:** prostitution is carried out in premises explicitly dedicated to providing sex.
- **Escort:** Client contacts sex worker by phone or via hotel staff.
- **Private:** similar to escort, except services provided in sex worker's premises.
- **Window or Doorways:** Brothels with sex workers on public display.
- **Club, public bar, and dance hall:** Clients solicited in alcohol vending venues and serviced on site or elsewhere.
- **Other all male venue:** Clients solicited in all-male venues such as barber shops, bathhouses and mining camps
- **Door knock or hotel:** Unattached males are approached in their hotel rooms or boarding houses.
- **Transport (ship, truck, train):** Sex workers may board vehicles to service the crew or passenger or pick up clients at stations and terminals.
- **Citizen Band (CB) radio:** Sex workers drive along highways using CB radio to exchange (jargon) messages with potential truck driver as clients. Services at truck or parking areas.
- **Others:** through various media including notice boards, newspaper advertisements, Sex worker catalogues with mobile phone numbers and the internet via virtual brothels etc. (Harcourt and Donovan, 2005).

(b) The indirect forms include:

- **Lab dancing:** A recent development involving erotic dancing at close quarters without sexual contact.
- **Massage parlor:** Premises ostensibly dedicated to providing massage, but a range of sexual services may be provided.
- **Travelling entertainers:** actors-dancer and others involved in entertainment may also provide sexual services.
- **Beer girls':** young women hired by major companies to promote and sell products in bars and clubs and in turn render sexual services to supplement income.
- **Street vendor and traders:** Ostensibly marketing rural produce or other goods but supplementing income with income from sexual services.
- **Opportunistic:** A person approached in a social event may occasionally choose to charge for sexual favours if the client appears wealthy enough.
- **Individual arrangement:** The single mother or divorced that may have sex with her landlord in place of rent.
- **Swingers Clubs:** Some swingers sex clubs may employ (undisclosed) sex workers if there is a shortage of female guests.
- **Geisha:** Woman engaged primarily to provide social company, but sex may ensue (Harcourt and Donovan, 2005).

Implications of sex work and its impact on public policy

(a) The Legal implication

There is a legal connection between any occupation and the laws in a country. In other words every occupational activity is carried out based on the limit which the laws permit. In Nigeria, sex work is considered an illegal occupational activity because the labour laws do not cover it. The Northern States of Nigeria that practiced Islamic Penal Code has made prostitution illegal. Equally, in Southern Nigeria, the law makes underage prostitution and the operation or ownership of brothels illegal under section 223, 224 and 225 of the Nigerian Criminal Code. It is important to state that the Nigeria law does not legalize commercial sex work and it is vague if such work is performed by an independent individual who operates on his or her own accord with the use of pimps or brothels (Nigerian Criminal Code). It is therefore illegal to operate or render services as a prostitute or in whatever guise as a commercial sex worker. This proviso has made law enforcement agents to undertake periodic search of brothels and hot spots suspected to carry out such economic activities. Punishments of the offenders are diverse, ranging from fines to imprisonment.

The Nigeria Criminal Justice Systems also prohibit national and transnational trafficking of women for commercial sex or forced labour. This has been on for some time now. Many Nigerian women and children have been taken abroad particularly to Libya and Italy with a promise of a decent work but ended up in prostitution camps. Nigeria is a signatory to the 2000 United Nations Protocol to prevent, suppress and punish trafficking in persons, especially women and children. Therefore, international prostitution is an offence, and a crime against humanity. Many countries of the world have adopted several strategies to control sex work, ranging from full to partial criminalization and to full legalization. For instance, full criminalization is practiced in countries like China and Russia. Though in the United States each state has its own laws and code, full contact sex is illegal except in some parts of Nevada where sex work using condom is permitted. Partial criminalization of sex work is permitted in Sweden while full legalization of sex work is practiced in Nevada (USA), Australia, Europe and the Netherlands. Legalization of the trade requires some registration processes from the sex workers and this make their activities to be regulated. Argument in favour of legalization of sex work stems from the fact that criminalization makes sex workers vulnerable to various abuses due to their marginalized position and the ability to be prosecuted by the Police even if they come forward as a victim (Human Rights Watch, 2019). For instance in Nigeria, groups of sex workers pressurized the Deputy Senate President (Dr. Ike Ekweremandu) to legalize sex work in the country. This yearning did not see the light of day in view of the legal implications associated with the trade. Particularly issues of human rights abuses and violation of human dignity. Arguably, many activities considered as work happens outside of individual body hence the legalization of sex work would lead to gross violation of women rights (rape and defilement), and other associated risk such as the spread of HIV/AIDs which the country is presently grappling with. In this wise, the country needs to include them in health insurance. Besides, since there is a nexus between sex work and criminality, legalization of the trade in Nigeria would

have opened doors for armed robbery, drug peddling and abuse and eventual mental health challenges.

(b) Sociological, Cultural and Psychological Implications.

Society has a mind and a soul. The mind of the society is the subjective meanings which members express about a social fact. Social facts exist outside of individual but influences individual behaviour. This collective agreement and existence is the soul of society. Work is considered as a social phenomenon involving occupational roles of some sort. The occupational role specifies the superior- subordinate relationships as well as the incumbent's relationship with clients. Occupational roles serve as a means of social identity in which the question of "who I am" and "what I am" can be discerned. Everybody in the society is addressed based on his/her occupational status. Hardly any society, where sex workers can proudly lay claims to his/her profession and want to be addressed as a professional sex worker. This is so because despite its economic benefits, it offends the sensibility and collective conscience of the society. In the Nigerian context, not all economic activities are regarded as work including sex work.

In this light, major cultures in Nigeria frowns on those who carry out sex work activities in the open. Those who engaged in sex work are culturally seen as wayward and morally bankrupt; having no respect and addressed as deviants. No gain saying, culturally, no one would love to marry a sex worker as a wife. Psychologically, society disregards them as people with less self worth, low self esteem and lower self dignity. Because of this socio-cultural definition and poor public image of sex workers, they have resulted in several indulgences such as drug addiction, depression, and suicide.

(c) The moral and religious implications

Nigeria is a highly religious and spiritual people. Chastity and self control are the moral and cardinal principles of major religions in Nigeria. For instance Christian religion forbids adultery and fornication (Exodus 20: 14, 1 Corinth 3: 16 and 1 Corinth 5:1-13). The consequences of sex work are that it is sacrilegious, and God can not dwell in bodies that have been defiled. By implication, it leads to a break in relationship between the sex workers and God. The moral suggestion therefore is that, it is sin and the end result of sin is always dead. Legalizing sex trade in Nigeria would have faced serious criticisms from well meaningful religious leaders and organization and would have suffered defeat same way as the law wishing to introduced gay marriage into the country. Sex work and homo-sexuality are seriously frown at by the two major religions in Nigeria.

Theoretical Framework

Social scientists have since employed theories to explain any phenomenon and these theories have provided framework upon which ideas and knowledge of the society are organized. In light of the above, functionalism and Push and pull theories are used in this paper to explain sex work.

Structural -Functionalism

Structural-Functionalism is a theory common to Sociology though not limited to it. The theory is mostly orchestrated in the works of Emile Durkheim, Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton. One basic assumption of the theory is that "all aspect of society - institutions, roles, norms etc serve a purpose and are functional for the long-term survival of the society". In other words, prostitution or sex work could be regarded as having functional consequences. It serves economic need to

the seller and country as well as reduces psycho- physical tension of the buyer. Hence, most countries decriminalize and permit sex work because of these reasons. Besides, structural-functionalism has also tries to establish a relationship between the strain imposed by society and changes in human behaviour. Merton (1957) noted that where some people do not have access to societal approve goals using societal approves means, variant behaviour emerged as a results of this which include: innovation, retreating, rebel or they conform. Sex work is an innovative behaviour to beat the strain of unemployment built up by the social structure.

Push and pull theory

Push and pull theory is one of the most important theories for studying floating population and immigrants. The theory holds that “the reason for migration and immigration are because people can improve their living condition through migration”. The push-pull theory explains the different reasons why people choose to move from one place to another. The push factors are those that force people to move out of their place of origin or sending country such as drought, famine, conflict, unemployment, low wages etc. while the pull factor are those factors that attract people into receiving or destination country such as employment, high wages, high standard of living etc. according to the push-pull theory, migration occurs as a result of a combination of push and pull factors (Mbah, 2018). In applying the push-pull theory to this study, women migrate from one place to the other either consciously or unconsciously (human trafficking) to engage in sex work to earn a living. And as Juno Mac (2019) noted, this trade is mostly found among minority groups, immigrants and low income workers.

METHODOLOGY

Studies Design

The study used survey research design in which opinions were sought from sex workers in the study area in order to ascertain the meanings and the subjective experiences which commercial sex worker attach to their activities in Nigeria. The researcher spent time interacting informally with the sex workers.

Population/sample of the Study

The population of this study is made up of 20 sex workers found (in brothels and road-sides) in Uyo metropolis, Akwa Ibom State. Accidental sampling was used in selecting the respondents.

Instrument for Data Collection

The instrument used for collecting data for the study was a structured Interview Guide. In view of the sensitivity of the research, the researcher avoided sensitive questions that task any sex worker’s personality disclosure by making the interview anonymous. The interview was conducted with some commercial sex workers in some brothels and road-sides sex workers at: Villa View Hotel Udo Inyang Street; Itam, Ambassador Hotel Ikot Ekpene Road, and Mai-tama, Ewet Housing. The answers were consistent thus providing the reliability of the instrument.

Tool for Data Analysis

The research combined both Simple percentages (%) and Content analysis in its analysis.

PRESENTATION OF DATA**Table 1: Analysis of respondents' Bio-social data**

Background Characteristics of Respondents	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Age		
15 – 20	2	10
21 – 25	3	15
26 – 30	8	40
31and above	7	35
Educational status		
No formal education	8	40
FSLC	3	15
SSCE	5	25
Diploma/ NCE	2	10
First Degree (B.Sc., B.A)	2	10
Schedule/Pattern of sex work		
Every time	17	85
Some time	3	15
Number of Clients Weekly		
1-10	7	35
11-20	8	40
21-30	2	10
31-40	2	10
41 and above	1	5
Venue of Sex Work		
Brothel/ hotel	10	50
Home of the sex worker	3	15
Home of the client	7	35
Hour per service		
1-3	9	45
4-7	7	35
8	4	20

Source: Field survey, 2021.

Data in Table 1 indicates that two of the sex workers (ten percent) were aged between fifteen-twenty-one years. Three of them (fifty percent) were between twenty -one to twenty-five years of age and eight of the sex workers (forty percent) were between twenty-six to thirty years of age while seven (thirty-five percent) of them were aged thirty-one years and above. Eight of the sex workers (forty percent) and the majority among them had no formal educational. Three had First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC), followed by five (thirty-five percent) of the sex workers who had Senior Secondary School Certificate Education (SSCE). Four of the sex workers have attended higher institutions with two having obtained Diploma and two of them have bagged Bachelor of Science B.Sc. /BA).

The Table further revealed that the majority (eighty-five percent) of the sex workers work on every time when scheduled while only three (fifteen percent) of the sex workers work only occasionally. Seven of the sex workers said they do have up to one to ten clients weekly, eight of them said they do sleep with eleven to twenty customers, while four of the sex workers said they do have sex with twenty-one to forty customers on a good week. Only one sex worker said she had sex once with 41 and above customers weekly. Ten and majority of the sex work (fifty percent) were carried out in brothels/hotels. Only three of the sex workers reported taking their clients home. Equally, the majority (nine) of the sex workers' services ranges from one to three hours; mostly short time. Seven of the sex workers (thirty-five percent) have rendered up to four -seven hours services to a client while only four of the sex worker reported having served a client up to eight hours and this service was booked overnight. It was found that the shorter the time the lesser the charges. In view of the high cost of service, most clients prefer short time

In-depth Interview (IDI) and analysis of the substantive issues

The study made use of structured interview guide to elicit answers from the respondents regarding the meaning they socially constructed about their activities. The questions asked and their responses are as reported below. Many of their responses were in pidgin English.

1. Do you consider that sex work is actually work in Nigeria?

A participant aged twenty-seven has this to say:

“of course, it is work. Any hustling is a job because I use the “ego” (money) to take care of myself”

Another participant said:

“oga (sir) any work na (is) work so far I no carry gun and in so far as it don put food for my table. Abi how you see am?”

The Third participant said:

“Na our office where we dey o. We are not joking; Ashawo na serious business o”. She laughed.

2. Do you think that sex work is a good economic venture?

1st participant:

“You know runs thing (sex work) is like work because it brings food on our table”.

Second participant responded in pigin English with a divergent view:

“I no get any other thing to do ooh. If you no see wetin to do, do wetin you see nah!!”

3. When asked, what motivates you to do this work (sex work)?

1st participant said thus:

“I don’t have anybody to rely on. I need money to take care of myself and my daughter”.

The second participant said:

‘My friend and colleagues introduced me to the job (sex work) and I make money because I am beautiful and I get plenty customers’.

4. How do you carry out your business?

A participant aged thirty-five said:

“My customers get my contact. They call me when they need me if by the day no one needs me, I go out by night standing by the road side to look for customers.

Another participant responded thus:

This is where I live (Brothel) I do short time and overnight depending on if you will pay well over night.

5. What are the hazards or challenges you are facing in the course of your work?

A participant aged 24 has this to say:

'Hmm person fit get disease for this our work O (Sex work). So na the wahala be that and another of the challenges be say police dey harass us anyhow. They collect money from us (bribe) otherwise they (Police) will arrest and take you to station.

6. Why do you choose sex work?

A participant responded aged twenty-five, said:

"It is just like every other work even though the thing dey as e be".

Another participant said thus:

"I choose it because I don't see other work to do".

Another said still:

"I take to it because my friend introduced me to it, and since I don't have somebody taking care of me, I decided to join her".

7. What are the major challenges that occur in this business or job ever since you opted to engage in it?

A participant aged 20 stated thus:

"The work (sex work) is not paying again as it used to be because some of us dey do juju to attract customer and some go for the internet please leave me alone"

Another participant with divergent view added thus:

"Before we no bin dey plenty for this business (sex work) but people come boku (many) so money no too dey again. Another thing is customers no too gree pay well, dem say things too hard.

The another participants aged 29 posited thus;

"You know say, this work dey as e be. Like me I dey hide at times do the work we no allow some of my friends to know say i do runs (sex work) because they will consider me as a bad girl".

8. Will you say truly that you like this your work?

One of the participants has this to say:

"My brother no be to say that this work where me I dey do, I truly like kam, but condition dey make crayfish bend".

Another of the sex worker said thus:

"Who go like to be Ashawo, if no be condition? Me I know that one day, I will quit this job and get married and have children and live a happy life".

Another one said:

"I no like the work, the day I hit good money to do another business, I will not do it again. Will you give me capital? She Laughed".

9. Will you still do this work even when you are married?

"No oooo". All of the participants said.

10. What dangers or hazards do you see in your work?

A participant said:

“The risk where dey for our work be say, you fit carry disease like sexual transmitted diseases if you no protect yourself well, well. And again, when you follow big men go hotel or house, they fit use you for ritual, even yahoo boys self”.

Another of the sex worker had this to say:

“Another thing where we dey face is police brutality. Them just the harass us anyhow. Sometime they will want to fuck us. Some will collect all our money and if you refuse to give, they will arrest you and carry you to the station”.

“Too, some of us who used to stand on the road, can get knock down by vehicles, or kidnapped”.

11. How do you handle these risks?

A participant said:

“Like I said you fit contact disease, so you have to protect yourself by making your client to use contraceptives like condom”. “I take drugs too and also go to hospital to check myself”.

Another participant suggested:

“We used to settle the owner of the hotel that we stay who will later settle the police. Some of the Police are my customer, so we know how to settle them”. “Too, we don’t keep our money with us. We sometimes give it to one of the hotel workers for safe keeping for us”.

Another said:

“To avoid being knocked down by an oncoming vehicle, you must stand at popular spots, bars known by the customers”. “And before going to a client’s house, you have to do some background check of the client; like getting his phone number and his name if possible”. Sometimes, if in the day time, your colleague can come with you”.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study found out the following:

i. This study found that some commercial sex workers in Nigeria see sex work as work. It was discovered that their responses was merely because sex work provides them with money to cater for their daily needs.

ii. The study equally discovered that the most common dimensions of sex work in Akwa Ibom state are: Hotel/ brothels, bars, dance hall and street prostituting. Although indirect form of sex work was also found such as beer girls and street vending/trading. The study also found that, with the growth of smart phones, electronic gadgets and other digital platforms, some sex workers may likely engage in other sophisticated forms of sex work in the future such as: phone sex operation, pornographic modeling and twerking.

iii. Some of the sex workers understood the hazards and risk associated with sex work and have also devised ways to avert the dangers associated with the work, although not full-proof. The relying on condom as a safety means of not contacting STDs is unconscionable acme of ignorance on their part as condom can bursts or contact other viruses such as Human Papiloma Virus, herpes or even HIV through skin to skin contact.

iv. Many of the sex workers were oblivious of the fact that sex work has legal, social and moral implications. The laws forbid it and commercial sex workers stand a huge chance of social

stigmatization by family members and friends. Nevertheless, few of them see the work subjectively as dehumanizing, sinful and not satisfy and would hop out if gotten any alternative.

v. Lastly, the study discovered that since law enforcement is weak, there is an increase in the sex trade and the workers in the industry complained a reduction in income. This is so because, the hard economic situation in the world economy as a result of covid-19 has deprived randy men of huge income for leisure activities and sex-workers of low patronage.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, commercial sex workers consider sex work as work in Nigeria in view of their disadvantaged economic positions and lack of an alternative economic engagement. Beyond the economic consideration, sex work has been found to have legal, socio-cultural and moral connotations. And since it is against the country's laws and societal values and morally abhorring, it cannot be said to be actually work in Nigeria.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made:

1. Government should endeavor to provide legitimate jobs to our teaming graduates especially the young girls,
2. Parents also should not neglect their role of providing financial support, continuous counseling and monitoring of their children especially their source of income.
3. There is need for Gender Based NGOs, Religious organizations, and political office holders to empower and support women and young girls both financially and educationally (through scholarship) in order to make them self-reliant. There is also the need to rehabilitate those caught in the web of this trade.
4. More efforts should be intensified by the law enforcement agencies especially the police in identifying and apprehending hotels and brothel owners (third party prostitution businessmen) promoting sex work in the state.
5. Advocacy and campaigns on moral upbringing should be vigorously pursuit to instill the moral values in our young girls and our youths in general.

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