Child Sexual Abuse: A Potential Damage to Children

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Abstract: Through various conferences, countries have been urged to take full measures to eliminate all forms of exploitation, abuse, harassment and violence against women, adolescents and girls. The existence of various instruments and institutions that condemn sexual exploitation notwithstanding, available evidence worldwide indicates that child sexual abuse is not only widespread but is on the increase. It is on this premise that this paper discusses the prevalence and effects of child sexual abuse; the disclosure and treatment of victims; and what the international law says about the offenders. It was recommended among others, that innovative methods of getting the vulnerable group, mainly girls, protected should evolve. It was also recommended that necessary treatment and rehabilitation protocol should be put in place to erase the social stigma that may possibly result from reported cases.

Keywords: Child, Sex, Abuse, Incest, Offender

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse is a form of child abuse in which an adult or older adolescent uses a child for sexual stimulation. Other forms of child abuse include physical abuse, emotional abuse and child neglect. Forms of child sexual abuse include asking or pressuring a child to engage in sexual activities (regardless of the outcome), indecent exposure of the genitals to a child, displaying pornography to a child, actual sexual contact against a child, physical contact with the child’s genitals (except in certain non-sexual contexts such as a medical examination), viewing of the child’s genitalia without physical contact (except in non-sexual contexts such as a medical examination), or using a child to produce pornography (Wikipedia, 2010). There is a unanimity of opinion on the concept of child. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the United Nations Population Division (UNPD) refer to children as those below 18 years of age (Aluko, 1996). Similarly, a child is defined by United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF, 1992) as a person under the age of 18, unless national laws fix an earlier age.

The problem of child sexual abuse has recently attracted much interest across the globe, owing to a number of factors. One of such factors is the nascent concept of reproductive health. The reproductive health movement, especially since the landmark International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo in 1994, has succeeded in drawing attention to the hitherto neglected critical elements of sexual and reproductive rights; including sexual exploitation of children and adolescents. The conference’s programme of action urges countries to take full measures to eliminate all forms of exploitation, abuse, harassment and violence against women, adolescents and girls. Similarly, paragraph 135 of Beijing Platform of Action of the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995 condemns sexual slavery, rape, sexual abuse and forced pregnancy (Population Reference Bureau, 1996).

Another factor is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. It is an international treaty that legally obliges states to protect children’s rights. Articles 34 and 35 of the convention require countries to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and sexual abuse. This includes outlawing the coercion of a child to perform sexual activity, the prostitution of children, the exploitation of children in creating

The existence of various instruments and institutions that condemn sexual exploitation and abuse of children notwithstanding, available evidence worldwide indicates that child sexual abuse is not only widespread but is on the increase. Sexual abuse is one of the most dehumanizing offences (Lema, 1997). There has been an increasing public concern and outcry regarding the escalating wave of sexual abuse of young girls in the recent past. The Nation (2010) in its editorial lamented the growing trend of sexual abuse in parts of Nigeria. It observed that the cases cut across any type of boundary, even age has nothing to do with it; for the perpetrators of the crime, it is the ‘unrestrained urge’. ANPPCAN (1999) in her intensive study on 100 female hawkers and 100 female non-hawkers aged between 8-15 years in Ibadan metropolis reported that 50% of the hawkers had sexual intercourse while 9% of the hawkers had been forced to sexual intercourse while out on errands or walking to or from school. Of the 50% who were sexually abused, only seven reported the event to parent or guardian. This may be due to fear or stigma of ridicule if the abuse is made public. In a survey of national dailies, Okunade (1998) identified 100 cases of sexual abuse of children whose ages ranged between 2 and 16 years. The victims were 94 girls and 6 boys while their assailants were aged 13 to 60 years. There were 5 cases of incest, out of which a daughter and 2 step-daughters were pregnant. In Ilorin, Adedoyin and Adegoke (1995) reported that 50% of commercial sex workers surveyed had their first sexual experience before 18 years and therefore stated that childhood sexual abuse could lead to prostitution.

Olusanya, Ogbemi, Uneigbe and Oronsaye (1986) reported that children of elementary schools (aged 6-12 years) and adolescent girls (13-19 years) in Benin-City were the major victims of rape, with 48.2% of reported cases over a 3-year period occurring in children below 13 years old. Omorodion (1994) also revealed that out of 950 rape cases reported at the hospital in Benin City, 58% involved child rape; 40% of these child-victims were those attending formal school, another 40% were engaged in hawking while the remaining 20% were idle. A report by Omorodion and Olusanya (1998) found 83% of 396 rape victims reporting at police clinics were girls between 13 and 19 years. Ogunyemi (2000) also reported some baseline findings from a community-based project on the incidence of child sexual abuse in two Nigerian urban centres. About 38% and 28% of female and male respondents respectively reported being initiated to sex before the age of 18 years. These findings, among other things, point to frightening dimensions child sexual abuse may be assuming in Nigeria.

In North America, approximately 15% to 25% of women and 5% to 15% of men were sexually abused when they were children (Gorey and Leslie, 1997). Most sexual abuse offenders are acquainted with their victims; approximately 30% are relatives of the child, most often brothers, fathers, uncles or neighbours; strangers are the offenders in approximately 10% of child sexual abuse cases (Whealin, 2007). According to Dube, Anda and Whitfield (2005), most child sexual abuse is committed by men; women commit 14% of offenses reported against boys and 60% of offenses reported against girls. Hall and Hall (2007) opined that most offenders who sexually abuse prepubescent children are pedophiles. Pedophiles are those who have persistent feelings of attraction toward prepubescent children, whether the attraction is acted upon or not. But Blaney and Million (2009) said that some offenders do not meet the clinical diagnosis standards for pedophilia.

According to the information from Justice Systems and Rape Crisis centres, in Chile, Peru, Malaysia and in USA; between one or two-thirds of known sexual assault victims are aged 15 years and younger. During childhood, young girls can become easy targets for older male relatives or friends who obtain sex through force or deception. Later, boyfriends, teachers, relatives or other men in authority may force young girls into unwanted sexual encounters. Matorah, Jenkes and Vindale (1997) reported that at an antenatal clinic in the outskirts of Cape Town in South Africa, 32% of 119 teenage mothers whose average age was 16 years reported that their first intercourse had been forced, 75% reported having had sex against their will at some point and 12.5% said they would be beaten if they refuse sex. Mensch (1996) reported that adolescent boys
have admitted that coercion of female partners is common, he also reported that in a focus group discussion in Kenya, boys aged 12-14 and 15-19 years confessed that they seduce girls at first but if they remain adamant, they force them and sometimes drug them or gag them to prevent them from screaming. In corollary to the above, Verga (1999) also reported that in South Africa, one teenage girl said; “I actually think forced sex is the norm. It's the way people interact sexually.”

In Barbados, 50% of girls and 2% of boys reported behaviour consisting sexual abuse in childhood or adolescent (Handwerker, 1993). Abuse among boys may be underreported compared to abuse among girls. Girls tend to report being more profoundly affected by sexual abuse than do boys although some boys undoubtedly suffer greatly (Olson and Ellsberg, 1999; Rind and Tromovitch, 1997). Meursing, Vas, Coutinho and Moyo (1995) said factors influencing child sexual abuse are male dominance in society and men's professed inability to control sexual desire. Many perpetrators were themselves sexually abused in childhood, although most boys who are sexually abused do not grow up to abuse others (Watkins and Bentovim, 1992).

2. Incest as Sexual Abuse

Incest between a child or adolescent and a related adult has been identified as the most widespread form of child sexual abuse with a huge capacity for damage to a child. Whealin (2007) stated that about 30% of all perpetrators of sexual abuse are related to their victim, 60% of the perpetrators are family acquaintances like a neighbour, baby sitter or friend; and 10% of the perpetrators in child sexual abuse cases are strangers. Child abuse offenses where the perpetrator is related to the child, either by blood or marriage, is a form of incest described as intrafamilial child sexual abuse.

Thomas (2010) reported the case of a father in Ibeju area of Lagos, who impregnated his daughter and rejected the child that came out of the incestuous affair. The house of abomination was sealed and the traditional head performed a traditional cleaning ritual to ward off what he called the "sure evil repercussions of the abominable act".

The most-often reported form of incest is father-daughter and step father- daughter incest, with most of the remaining reports consisting of mother/stepmother- daughter/ son incest (Turner, 1996). Similarly, some argue that sibling incest may be as common, or more common than other types of incest. Goldman and Padayachi (1997) reported that 57% of incest involved siblings. Finkelhor (1979) reported that over 90% of nuclear family incest involved siblings. Also, Cawson, Wattam and Broker (2000) showed that sibling incest was reported twice as often as incest perpetrated by fathers/ stepfathers.

Prevalence of parental child sexual abuse is difficult to assess due to secrecy and privacy; some estimates show 20 million Americans have been victimized by parental incest as children (Turner, 1996).

3. Effects of Child Sexual Abuse

Violence and child sexual abuses have been linked to many serious health problems, both immediate and long term. These include physical health problems such as injury, chronic pain syndrome, permanent disability and range of mental health problems. The psychological consequences of abuse are considered more serious than its physical effects. The experience of such abuse often erodes girl's self esteem and puts them at greater risk of variety of mental health problems, including depression, post traumatic stress disorder, phobia, suicide and alcohol and drug abuse.

Ogunyemi (2000) reported the psychological effects of child sexual abuse as feelings of vulnerability, unworthiness and powerless difficulty in distinguishing sexual from affectionate behavior; difficulty in maintaining personal physical boundaries; inability to refuse unwanted sexual advances; mistrust, shame, guilt or fear about sexual activities; and mental health problems. The behavioural consequences in the researcher's analysis are involvement in unprotected sex, earlier sexual initiation, multiple sex partners, unwanted pregnancy and increased risk of infection with sexually transmitted diseases (including HIV/AIDS).
Olufemi-Kayode (2010) in her interaction with the people who had experienced sexual violence discovered that some of the people felt like committing suicide; some wanted vengeance; some suffered trauma, mental challenges and sexuality problems as married adults among other defects.

Sexually abused children suffer from more psychological symptoms than children who have not been abused; studies have found symptoms in 51% to 79% of sexually abused children. The risk of harm is greater if the abuser is a relative, if the abuse involves intercourse or attempted intercourse or if threats or force are used (Bulik, Prescott and Kendler, 2001). The level of harm may also be affected by various factors, such as penetration, duration and frequency of abuse, and use of force (Nelson, Heath and Madden, 2002). The social stigma of child sexual abuse may compound the psychological harm to children (Holguin, 2003).

4. Disclosure

Children who received supportive responses following disclosure had less traumatic symptoms and were abused for a shorter period of time than children who did not receive support (Kogan, 2005). In general, studies have found that children need support and stress-reducing resources after disclosure of sexual abuse. Negative social reactions to disclosure have actually been found to be harmful to the survivor’s well-being. Ullman (2003) reported that children who received a bad reaction from the first person they told, especially if the person was a close family member, had worse scores as adults on general trauma symptoms, post traumatic stress disorder symptoms and dissociation. Also, Roesler (1994) found that in most cases, when children did disclose abuse, the person they talked to did not respond effectively, blamed or rejected the child, and took little or no action to stop the abuse. Although hearing a victim’s disclosure might be uncomfortable, for the sake of the victim’s well-being, it is important to be able to respond effectively. Showing that you understand and take seriously what the child is saying is an important first step.

5. Treatment

The initial approach to treating a person who has been a victim of sexual abuse is dependent upon several factors; such as age at the time of presentation and circumstances of presentation for treatment. The goal of treatment is not only to treat current mental health issues, but to prevent future ones.

5.1 Children and Adolescents

Children are often presented for treatment in one of several circumstances, including criminal investigations, custody battles, problematic behaviours and referrals (Winn and Urquiza, 2004). The three major modalities for therapy with children and teenagers are family therapy, group therapy and individual therapy. Which course is used depends on a variety of factors that must be assessed on a case by case basis. For instance, treatment of young children generally requires strong parental involvement, and can benefit from family therapy. Adolescents tend to be more independent and can benefit from individual or group therapy. The modality also shifts during the course of treatment, for example group therapy is rarely used in the initial stages, as the subject matter is very personal and / or embarrassing.

5.2 Adults

Adults with a history of sexual abuse are often presented for treatment with a secondary mental health issue, which can include substance abuse, eating disorders, personality disorders, depression and conflict in romantic or inter-personal relationships (Swaby and Morgan, 2009).

Generally, the approach is to present the problem rather than the abuse itself. Treatment is highly varied and depends on the person’s specific issues. For instance, a person with a history of sexual abuse suffering
from severe depression would be treated for depression. However, there is often an emphasis on cognitive restructuring due to the deep-seated nature of the trauma. Some newer techniques such as Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) have been shown to be effective (Edmond and Rubin, 2004).

6. Offenders

Offenders are more likely to be relatives or acquaintances of their victim than stranger. According to Denov (2003), more offenders are male than female. He reported that the percentage of incidents of sexual abuse by female perpetrators that come to the attention of the legal system is usually 1% and 4%. Maletzky (1993) found that, of his sample of 4,402 convicted pedophilic offender, 0.4% were female. Another study of a non-clinical population found that, among those in their sample that had been molested, as much as a third were molested by women (Tomeo, Templer, Anderson and Kotler (2001).

Groth and Birnbaum (1978) categorized child sexual offenders into two groups, 'fixated' and regressed'. Fixated were described as having a primary attraction to children, whereas regressed had largely maintained relationships with other adults, and were even married. Their study also showed that adult sexual orientation was not related to the sex of the victim target; for example, men who molested boys often had adult relationships with women.

According to Psychology Today (2006), causal factors of child sex offenders are not known conclusively. The experience of sexual abuse as a child was previously thought to be a strong risk factor, but research does not show a causal relationship, as the vast majority of sexually abused children do not grow up to be adult offenders, nor do the majority of adult offenders report childhood sexual abuse.

7. International Law on Child Sexual Abuse

Child sexual abuse is outlawed nearly everywhere in the world, generally with severe criminal penalties, including life imprisonment or capital punishment in some jurisdictions (Levesque, 1999). An adult's sexual intercourse with a child below the legal age of consent is defined as statutory rape, based on the principle that a child is not capable of giving consent and any apparent consent by a child is not considered to be legal consent.

8. Conclusion

From this study, it is evident that child sexual abuse is widespread and it cuts across nations. This is an unfortunate development because the practice has grave physical and psychological consequences. In Nigeria as in some other parts of the world, reports of sexual abuse do not guarantee redress or punishment of the offenders. This is because sexual socialization perpetuates powerful mythologies which make it difficult to prosecute sexual criminals without evidence of physical injury from assault, collaborating eye witnesses or other difficult evidence. Drastic and urgent measures have to be put in place to save children, mainly females, from the harmful consequences of unrestrained sexual urge of the males.

9. Recommendations

1. Innovative methods of getting the vulnerable grouped mainly girls, protected should evolve. These should include how to identify and prevent situations that facilitate child sexual abuse at various units of the society.

2. Certain stereotype about sexual relationship should be addressed. These include those beliefs that define the sexual life and rights of the female gender as appendages to males.
3. Majority of the people think a girl means “yes” when she says “no” to men’s sexual advances. Public information and education is required to create new consciousness about a girl’s “no” being “no”.

4. Traditionally, sex-related issues are not discussed openly. People should be encouraged to talk about sexual matters in ways that could promote children’s reproductive health.

5. There should be public sympathy for victims of child sexual abuse because it has been observed that the greater the stigma attached to sexual abuse and the lower the public sympathy for victims, the less likely that rapes and other forms of abuse will be reported to formal authority.

6. Necessary treatment and rehabilitation protocol should be put in place to erase the social stigma that may possibly result from reported cases. Collaboration with existing government agencies like Welfare Units and Ministry of Women Affairs as well as non-governmental Organizations (NGOs) may help in this direction.

7. Anyone that is caught sexually molesting a child should be prosecuted and adequately punished.

References


