

Girl Child and Sexual Harassment: A Study of Catholic Parishes in Uyo Diocese of Akwa Ibom State

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the effects of sexual harassment on female children in selected Catholic Parishes in Uyo Diocese, of Uyo Local Government Area, in Akwa Ibom State. Related literature were reviewed and radical feminist theory was used as the theoretical framework. The study was qualitative, utilizing Focus Group Discussion (FGD) and indepth interviews, to collect information from young girls and other key informants in Catholic Churches in Uyo Catholic Diocese of Akwa Ibom State. It involved respondents, from 3 Catholic Parishes in Uyo Diocese; Regina Coeli Catholic Church, Shelter Afrique Estate, Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Aka Offot, and St. John's Catholic Church, Wellington Bassey Road; responses were gotten from 280 respondents and analyzed. Findings from the study revealed that majority of sexual attackers are drug addicts and dipsomaniacs who are always under the influence of alcohol /drugs while indulging in the crime. It was also revealed, the harassers are mostly children from broken homes and poor parenting background. It was revealed that girls who dresses indecently/ immorally are always attacked by these harassers. The study recommends that indecent dressing should be disapproved by parents, family members and society at large; and thus sanctions should be attached to defaulters. Drug abuse/addiction should be frowned at by the society, with appropriate laws that reprimand defaulters and additionally, parents, families and society should see child upbringing as the collective work of everyone for a better society and tomorrow.

Keywords: *Girl child, Sexual harassment, Catholic parishes*

INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly changing world, the protection and empowerment of our youth, particularly a girl child, have become critical focal point in social discourse. Among the various challenges that these young girls face, one of the most alarming and pervasive is sexual harassment.

The main purpose or subject matter of this write-up is to orientate us on the appraisal of who, a girl child is, and the unfortunate connection with the term "sexual harassment"

Before we adumbrate the details of our topic; "a girl child and sexual harassment" let us first simply give an insight on the terminologies involved in this discussion.

Who is a girl child?

Biological speaking, a “girl” refers to a human female in the early stages of development, typically from birth to the onset of puberty. During this stage, girls undergo various physical and physiological changes as they grow and mature. This includes the development of secondary sexual characteristics, such as breast, development and the beginning of the menstrual cycle, which typically marks the transition from girlhood to adolescence. Generally, the term “girl” is often used to distinguish females in this stage of life from adult women.

On the other hand, a “child” is a human being in the early stages of life and development, usually from birth to adolescence. It encompasses both male and female individuals in this age range, emphasizing their stage of growth and dependence on caregivers.

Having said that, a “girl child” is a term specifically used to refer to a female human being in the early stages of life and development, typically from birth to adolescence. It highlights the gender (female) of the child and emphasizes her unique experiences, challenges, and needs during this stage of life. This term is often employed in discussions related to gender equality, child rights, and the well-being of young girls.

Furthermore, what is sexual harassment?

According to Cambridge Dictionary, it is the act of forcing someone to take part in a sexual activity with you, or of touching someone in a sexual way when they do not want you to. Also, the World Health Organization (WHO) does not necessarily define sexual harassment but defines sexual violence as: ‘Any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, unwanted sexual comments or advances, or acts to traffic or otherwise directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work. It is against this background that this study will examine girl child and sexual harassment in the catholic diocese of Uyo.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The experiences of the girl child in most cases is always traumatic and devastating. Imagine a 12-year-old girl being sexually abused by the biological father often times, simply because the mother is late, and the father assumes this poor lad replaces the mother both in domestic and sexual responsibilities. What a world! An adult having canal knowledge of her own blood (daughter) and threatening to kill her if she dares make it known to public knowledge. If she is married off early, she might forfeit the opportunity of western education, and if she remains in the father’s home, is subjected to child labor and becomes a victim of incest and rape, poor innocent child!

In today’s society, stories abound of little girls being defiled by either the biological parents, guardian or masters. The world health organization (WHO) notes that one in five girls has experienced sexual violence globally. In most traditional societies, female genital mutilation or female circumcision is still being practiced, and I think this is one of the ways girls are sexually abused or harassed.

What about the recent case of Dr. Femi Olaleye, a medical Director of optimal Cancer Care Foundation, Lagos, who has been convicted and sentenced to life imprisonment of having both oral and vaginal sex with a 16 year old wife's niece? Committing incest and rubbing this poor girl. An educated medical practitioner, who is quite aware of the implications and consequences. This was reported by Sahara Reporters on October 24, 2023.

Sexual harassment occurs when one party makes unwelcome moves, gestures or advances to the other person through the use of force or any other hard strategy to lure the other person to have canal knowledge. These harassers nurse these ill feelings towards these under aged girls and may try to deceive them or in most cases force them to penetrate.

Sexual harassment of these innocent children create unforgettable psychological and emotional experiences. This causes disordered psychic or behavioral state resulting from severe emotional stress or physical injury and most often, the victim might not fully recover from the experiences.

Sexual harassment does not only end in our homes, but nowadays, female children are raped by their teachers and lecturers in schools. The recent protest by the University of Calabar law undergraduates, of the alleged sexual harassment by a Professor of Law , Cyril Ndifon, is an instance.

In a convocation address to the University of Calabar in 1989, a one-time military president of Nigeria, General Ibrahim Babangida lamented over cases of sexual harassment in institutions of higher learning. His concern and disapproval speech, brought about the constitution of a National Committee on Sexual Harassment in Educational Institutions in the country and was so inaugurated within the same year.

This ungodly act is not only condemned physically. Spiritually, as recorded in the Holy bible and captured in (Genesis 34:2). "And when Schechem the son Hamor the Hivite, the prince of the land saw her, he seized her and lay with her and humiliated her" and in I Thessalonians 4:3-6;"For this is the will of God, your sanctification, that you abstain from sexual immorality; that each one of you know how to control his own body in holiness and honor not in the passion of lust, like the Gentiles who do not know God; no one transgress and wrong his brother in this matter because the lord is an avenger in all these things, as we told you beforehand and solemnly warned you". From the forgone, the bible condemns sexual harassment and immorality as its not only humiliates and defiles the victim, but is a sin before mankind and the heavens.

Sexual harassment of the girl child has become a social problem as it does not only affect the victim, but the development of the entire society. The popular saying: Educate a girl child and you educate the entire nation is being voided as this victim cannot, in most cases function effectively academically. Sexual exploitation/harassment has become an endemic problem which has eaten into the fabric of our nation. It has reduced the level of development socially, economically, psychologically and otherwise. The question now is what are the factors that contributes to this problem of sexual harassment? What are the roots of sexual harassment? How can it be eradicated from our society, what are the way forward?

If should cast our minds backward, far back as 2019, a 17 year old Hassana Ibrahim was allegedly raped by her class teacher, Umuru.

Narrating her ordeal, Hassana confessed the teacher lured her into his room while returning home from Islamiyya, where she attended an Arabic night class in Sokoto. The victim said, Umuru invited her home to greet his wife, who had put to birth. After much pestering by her teacher, she conceded to follow him, but right there in the house, the story changed, Hassana did not see neither the mother nor the baby, rather was deceived they were in the bath. Umuru ceased and dragged her into the inner room, forced and raped her. Umuru impregnated the poor innocent child. Right now, Hassana is taking care of a four-year-old child, only by herself and her mother. Putting this poor girl into family way is what I do not understand. The question is, did Umuru not see any grown up girl to make advances to, and have unprotected sex? What might have caused this disheartening and wicked behavior?.

Sexual harassment often happens at home, but can happen in school. The harassers try to trick or trap children into doing something they wouldn't want to do. They often ask the victims to keep what they do to them a secret; or bribe them with gift and treats. Sometimes they threaten them not to tell anybody about the abuse, and if at all they should try, they will kill them or harm their family members.

Review of related literature and theoretical framework

Female children in the world over, faces sexual harassment and abuse. Bamishaye (2008) posited that girls and women are the greatest of the poor in Nigeria as they are plagued with poverty of ignorance, illiteracy, discrimination and injustice, cultural oppression, seclusion, rape, HIV/AIDS. Victimization of women by men in almost all societies has been the focus of academic interest and research for many years. (Brownmiller, 1975, Graffin, 1979, Koss, 1992, Watts & Zimmaman, 2002). Looking at the personality characteristics of sexual harassers, it has been observed that, there have been limited research focusing directly on the personality characteristics and traits of sexual harassers. Lee, Gizzarore & Ashton (2003) found out that the Honesty – Humility trait was more strongly associated with sexual harassment possibilities than any of the other five traits (John, Donahue & Kentle, 1991) in both self and Peer reports.

The honesty – Humility traits is a dimension that represents individual differences in the reluctance or willingness to exploit others. Ashron, Lee & Son, 2000).

A wider ranging categorization scheme was introduced by Lengnick (1995). In his overview of the research literature on ways in which the harassing behavior might develop. He differentiated between three types of perpetrators, “hard core”, opportunist and insensitive. Hard Core” harassers are individuals who seek out favorable opportunities to harass, and when confronted, are unlikely to refrain.

“opportunist” do not actively seek out situations that enable them to harass, but will take advantage of the opportunity if it presents itself. Finally, insensitive harassers are unaware of the impact of their actions and are more likely to desist if confronted.

But because some harassers appear to target a small number of victims incessantly, whereas others target many more, when the opportunity permits, a number of typologies have tended to focus on this dimension (Gelfard et al, 1995, Fitz Gerald et al, 1995, Lucro et, al, 2003). For instance, some men who display unrelenting harassment to a few victims have been

labeled persistent pursuers (Lucero et al., 2003) or “hard core harassers” (Lengnick Hall, 1995). Finally, some writers have identified “vulnerable” (Litcero et al., 2003) or “insensitive” (Lengnick Hall, 1995) harassers who usually target fewer victims and whose harassment is interwoven with the search for an affectionate relationship. This last category of harassers appear to confirm beliefs (Brewer, 1982) that sexual harassment reflects social awkwardness or lack of social skills in men who develop romantic interests towards women at work.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework adopted in this study to explain the girl/child sexual harassment is the radical feminist theory. Feminist theory emerged from the struggle for women’s rights beginning in the 18th century with Mary Wollstonecraft’s publication of; *A Vindication of the rights of woman*. Important feminist theorists of the 20th Century include Betty Friedan, Julia Kristeva, Judith Butler, Elaine Showalter, Carol Gilligan and Adrienne Rich. Radical Feminist theory combines elements of other theoretical modules such as Psychoanalysis, Marxism, post-structuralism to interrogate the role of gender in writing, interpretation and dissemination of literary texts, concerned with the politics of women’s authorship and representation of women in literature. Feminist theory has recently begun to examine ideas of gender and sexuality across a wide range of disciplines including film studies, geography and even economics. Feminist theory emerged from the struggle for women’s rights calling for a radical reordering of society in which male supremacy is eliminated in all social and economic contexts, while recognizing that women’s experiences are also affected by other social divisions such as race, class and sexual orientation. Radical feminists locate the root cause of women’s oppression in patriarchal gender relations as opposed to legal systems (as in liberal feminism) or class conflict (as in Marxist feminism) Radical feminists assert that the global society functions as a patriarchy in which the class of men are the oppressors of class of women. They proposed that the oppression of women is the most fundamental form of oppression, one that had existed since inception of humanity. As radical feminist, Ti-Grace Atkinson wrote in her foundational piece “Radical feminism (1969).

The first dichotomous division of this mass (mankind) is said to have been on the grounds of sex, male and female. It was because half of the human race bears the burden of the reproduction process and because man, the “rational” animal had to take advantage of that, that the child bearers or the beasts of burden, recorded into a political (or necessary) penalty, thereby modifying these individuals definitely from the human to the functional, or animal

Radical feminists argue that, because of patriarchy, women have come to be viewed as the “other” to the male norm, and as such, have been systematically oppressed and marginalized.

CHALLENGES OF THE GIRL CHILD

A girl child faces more hurdles in life than the male counterpart. Though, because of the state economy, poverty has eaten into the fabric of the society; but I want to tell us that, girls are more vulnerable to these challenges. Statistics have shown that the female children constitute greater number out of school children than boys. Keeping girls in school supports both economic and societal development. Below are the many challenges faced by a girl child in our society today;

- (1) **Child marriage:** Child marriage refers to giving out of a girl in marriage below the adult age of 18 years. This happens mostly in developing countries. The reason being that the parents cannot afford the basic needs for these children, and give preferences priority to male children than female and thus, believes they should be the source of income and upliftment by selling them out in marriage. These innocent children are more likely to experience teenage pregnancy, develop complications during pregnancy and child birth; which might result in death.
As so reported by UNICEF in 2017, there are about 700 million women around the world who were married before the adult age of 18 years. In sub-Saharan Africa, 4 in 10 girls are married under age 18. In Nigeria, especially in the remote religions, girls are given out to older men even when they are still babies.
- (2) **Household chores:** Most of these girls engage in tedious domestic chores. The society believes the girls are socially constructed to perform all the household chores and so, these young girls involve in tedious works that retard their growth and reduces self-esteem. Some of the parents in the traditional societies prioritize the child's (girl child) involvement in domestic chores to that child's education which hinders growth and development in the society. Girls spend more time performing household chores than reading and having good time like the boys. They perform 60% of the household unpaid chores, and if dare refuses to do so, will be punished. In some cities in Nigeria, a girl child whose mother sales in the market, must finish in the morning, go to the market to help sell, before going to school, and most times, go late to school and misses the early morning classes, and most often, English and mathematics classes. In Akwa Ibom State, 10 out of 30 of the girls that the mothers are food venders, popularly tagged "mama put" sells in the morning before going to school later in the day.
- (3) **Education:** In our today's society, most parents, especially the uneducated ones, prioritize boy's education to girls' own. When girls experience quality education, they are more likely to contribute positively to societal development.
- (4) **Bullying:** Some of these girls are battered. Bullying undermine the child's esteem. This result in low self-esteem and self-harm.
In Nigeria, cases are seen when these girls are bullied here and there, and some feel depressed; these teenage girls have the habit of comparing themselves, their body, their appearance to other girls of their age.
- (5) **Gender-based violence:** Gender-based violence includes physical and sexual abuse, harassment and bullying. Coercion, discrimination and other types of abuse. Most girls are harassed and abused on their way to school every year, at home or when going for errands.
- (6) **Conflict and crises:** Girls, the world over, experience conflict and crises in the society. In Africa, 85% of primary school aged girls, do not attend school, in contrast to 63% of primary school aged boys.
- (7) **Trafficking:** Though boys also faces problem of trafficking, girls remain the most victims, girls who are trafficked faced high rate of physical/sexual abuse.
As reported in the Guardian Newspaper of 11 October, 2015 by Ijeom Opara, on the challenges and future of the Nigerian girl child, the annual celebration highlighted

issues concerning gender inequality facing young girls as tagged “the power of the adolescent girl: vision for 2030”. The issues included right to education/access to education, nutrition, legal representation, medical care, protection, violence against women, and child marriage.

According to the Executive Director, Women Advocates Research and Documentation Centre (WARDC) Dr. Aliya Akiyode-Afolabi, she pointed out that, government has not done enough in addressing issues concerning the girl child and needs to get more girls in schools. According to her, Nigeria still contributes the highest number of out-of-school children.

Secondly, education leads to development and growth, if not taken seriously it will negatively impact on the growth and development of the society.

She stated that the most common and worrisome issue of the girl child today is sexual harassment; and pointed out that the media is awash with scandalizing cases of sexual harassment in the homes, schools and hospitals.

As analyzed, the girl child is exposed to constant abuse from uncles, classmates, teachers and family friends.

A psychiatrist, Dr. Akhator Eneka, while commencing on the emotional effects of, society neglecting the girl child said, girls suffer from low esteem, when preference is often made to the boys particularly in the home. Having analyzed the different challenges encountered by the female child, the question now is what is the fate of these innocent children? How can it be remedied?

- (1) Educate your girl child about sex, and sex advances for her to know when someone starts this unruly behavior.
- (2) Teach her how to be safe and all about precautions too, as you may not always be there to guide and control her relationships outside the home.
- (3) Educate her perfectly on the sex front. It is important for you to pass all relevant information about sex as and when she grows.
- (4) Make sure your girl child is close to you, and can confide in you, and so, discusses everything with you.
- (5) If she is being ill-treated, maltreated or bullied, advice and encourage her to stand against it and protest by reporting to appropriate quarters.
- (6) Monitor and disapprove of bad friends and companions even outside the home.
- (7) Report cases of sexual harassment to appropriate quarters, do not conceal in the name of avoiding stigmatization.
- (8) Government, parents, guardians and caregivers should not prioritize boys’ education to the girls’
- (9) The girls should not be marginalized, undermined or treated inferiorly to avoid depression.
- (10) Encourage the teenage girl to take her studies seriously. sometime off should be given to extra-curricular activities that she likes.
- (11) Get her to develop the spirit of hard work by appealing to her conscience that the only route to success is through hard work.
- (12) A girl child should be over protected, guided and monitored to avoid them being harassed by the predators.

- (13) Female/girl education should be made mandatory
- (14) Equality between the two sexes should be built.
- (15) A girl child should dress decently and modestly, avoid dresses that exposes one's body.
- (16) Alcoholism and drug addiction should be greatly frowned at by the society, and offenders should be dealt with by the law.

METHODOLOGY

The study was qualitative, utilizing focus group discussion (FGD) and in-depth interviews (IDIS) to collect information from young girls and key informants from Catholic Churches in Uyo. It involved respondents from 3 major catholic Churches; Regina Coeli Catholic Church, Shelter Afrique, Uyo, Sacred Heart Catholic Church, Aka Offot and St. John's Catholic Church, Wellington Bassey Way.

RESULTS, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

TABLE I: Socio-demographic Information of Respondents (N=280)

Demographic Profile	Variable	Frequency	Percentage %
Sex	Male	50	17.8
	Female	230	82.2
	Total	280	100
	12-20yrs	100	35.8
	21-39yrs	80	28.6
	40-49yrs	50	17.8
	50-60years	50	17.8
	Total	280	100
Marital Status	Married	90	32.2
	Single	130	46.5
	Divorced	50	17.8
	Widow/Widowers	10	3.5
	Total	280	100
Educational qualifications	FSLC	20	7.1
	WAEC	80	28.6
	OND	100	35.8
	HND/BSC	60	21.4
	MSC/PhD	20	7.1
	Total		17.8

RESPONSES ON THE EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL AND DRUG ADDICTION ON THE PREVALENCE OF SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Reacting to question number one, that is, the likelihood that dipsomaniacs and drug addicts are always involved in sexual harassment, 200 out of the 280 respondents asserted that, most of these harassers are always under the control of alcohol or hard drugs, and so, they feel it is

right to abuse or have canal knowledge of whosoever they feel they have to; to satisfy their incessant urge. quoting one of the female respondents from Ukanafun, name withheld, she said “The kidnapers from Ukanafun, when they make themselves high with these drugs, can even sleep with their abductors even when the person is an old woman”. Furthermore, majority of the respondents 190 (67.8%) confirmed that, why most of the harassers are always under the influence of alcohol while attacking their victims is because, while under this influence, they do not reason right, they see themselves above the laws of the land, and above all, there is no conscience and fear of God at this moment.

RESPONSES ON THE EFFECT OF INDECENT DRESSING ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Responding to question number two; the likelihood that girls who dresses indecently are prone to sexual harassment; majority 230 [82.2%] of the respondents affirmed that indecent dressing encourages immorality and seduces people who already have the habit of sexually abusing others. Majority of the 200 (71.4%) respondents testified most girls especially those in higher institutions wear dresses that exposes their breasts, laps and even bobs; and thus, predisposing themselves to these attackers. Also, majority 260 (92.8%) of the respondents testified that, even in secondary schools, girls wear short skirts and would shape already sown clothes to meet their taste; and such exposes all the would -be hidden features to the world. These misdeeds according to the respondents seduce these harassers.

EFFECTS OF POOR PARENTING ON SEXUAL HARASSMENT

(a) Responding to question (7); how poor parenting increase the prevalence of sexual harassment and rape in the society, 90% of the respondents opined that all the problems we experience in the society have their roots; and that poor parenting is the number one cause of sexual harassment and other problems we encounter in the society today.

They further explained that, most families do not care about what their children do, how they behave, the friends and companies they, keep and even the way they dress. The Families do not instill the discipline and fear of God into these children and thus, they children become wayward and menace to the society.

CONCLUSION

Sexual harassment involves using both implicit and explicit unwelcomed and sexual advances on people especially the under-aged, in order to lure and entice the innocent victim towards accepting the unruly behavior. It involves the exchange of favors both in cash and otherwise, just to win the victim. However, in most cases, the victim is forced to engage in this ungodly act and thus subjecting victims to sexually transmitted disease and early pregnancies. Often times, the psychological trauma, this causes the victim is registered in the victim’s sub -consciousness throughout her lifetime and this could be manifested afterwards, through aggressiveness, hatred, impatience and other unacceptable behaviors that would be displayed by the victim in due cause. Be that as it may, this work has tried to point out some causes of sexual harassment especially in a girl child, the consequences and how it could be minimized or curbed.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- (1) Indecent/immoral dressing should be disapproved by the society and bye laws should be made in our tertiary institutions to curb this menace.
- (2) Drug addiction should be frowned at by the society and grave punishments should be attached to defaulters.
- (3) Character molding/formation should not only be the duties of the family members, but a joint efforts of parents, families, teachers and the general society.
- (4) Encourage her to develop the spirit of hard work by appealing to her conscience that the only route to success is through hard work.
- (5) A girl child should be over-protected, guided and monitored to avoid them being harassed by the predators.
- (6) Female/girl education should be made mandatory
- (7) Equality between the two sexes should be built.
- (8) A girl child should dress decently and modestly, avoid dresses that exposes one's body.

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