

Sexual Abuse of Children in Awka, Anambra State Nigeria

Leonard N. Ezeh¹, Nnaemeka C. Abamara¹, *Izuchukwu L.G. Ndukaihe² & *Ugochukwu R. Ikwuagwu²

1. Department of Psychology, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Nigeria

2. Department of Psychology, University of Nigeria, Nsukka.

leomikelking@yahoo.com,; abamaranc@yahoo.com,; *izumario@yahoo.co.uk,; *ugormp@yahoo.com,

Abstract

This exploratory study used sixty six (66) children as research participants aimed at establishing the following: the incidence of sexual abuse of children in Awka, the Anambra State Capital of Nigeria, and its environs; the profiles of the victims and assailants; the motivational factors associated with the problem. Findings revealed a high incidence of sexual abuse among children in Awka and its environment. The result also showed that almost every child is vulnerable to being sexually abused by parents, guardians, relatives, caretakers or strangers. Based on this, a viable child protection policy by government was advocated.

Keywords: Sexual Abuse, Children in Awka, Anambra State, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Ideally, the childhood period is supposed to be a time of great happiness, filled with joy and good cheer, devoid of the crises / uncertainties and danger that are often the hallmark of adult life. There is a general assumption that the child ought to be given / provided with adequate needs (psychological and physical needs) necessary for a secure and healthy growth. Essentially, in spite of much conventional wisdom as 'spare the rod and spoil the child', punitive measures or unnecessary punishment of a child is mostly condemned (Obot, 1988). In the light of the above, it is the cardinal responsibility of every parent to ensure that the transition from childhood to adulthood of their children is smooth and crises free.

At a general level, most if not all human societies train their children in consonance with the philosophy which emphasizes that a child is the most cherished asset and the hope of tomorrow. However, in spite of this assumption, all societies at all times have exposed their children to traumatic experience in the hands of strangers, their relatives, and the parents alike. The helplessness, hopelessness and powerlessness of children and consequently, their low esteem and status in the society have been exploited by adults. In all; children have been psychologically and physically battered, abused and neglected by parents, guardians and by strangers.

Abuse refers to injury inflicted upon an individual. Basically, psychological abuse is often in the form of rejection or hostility while neglect refers to inadequacies in the supply of psychological and physical needs such as good clothing, parental care, and emotional involvement (National Centre of Child Abuse & Neglect, 1978). According to Bhatia (2009) abuse is referred to as an inappropriate and harmful treatment of another person (child, elder, spouse). The most common form of abuse is child abuse.

Child abuse, especially its definition, incidence and management, is difficult to comprehend. Perceptions of what constitutes child abuse have differed with time and culture (Jekayinfa & Olavvepo, 2011). Crystal (1995) defined child abuse as the treatment of the child in a way unacceptable to a given culture at a given time. Fundamentally, child abuse and neglect have received much recognition in the western world long before now and currently in the developing countries, like Nigeria. The 'battered child syndrome' for instance, has become a legitimate medical problem, and societal awareness and interest in public problems for children has expanded beyond mere interest in immunization and disease control (Bross, 1979).

In Africa, particularly in Nigeria, however, the awareness and attention on child abuse and neglect is a recent phenomenon. The government at various levels has started enacting some implementable laws for the protection of children's rights and interests. In this regard, some Non-governmental agencies (NGOs) like African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) have emerged with the primary goal of sensitizing both the people and government on the dangers of abuse and neglect of children in the society.

2.1 Sexual abuse of children

Fundamentally, sexual abuse of children is one form of abuse that has little attention and coverage in the literature (Kinard, 1979). Sexual abuse refers to any act or action of sexual nature on or with a child (NCCAN, 1978) usually performed by one of the parents, or the guardian or a stranger or a relative. The terms used to designate the experience of sexual abuse include the following: defilement, incest, sexual assault, and violation (Obot, 1988). Sexual abuse is unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats or taking advantage of victims not able to give consent. Most victims and perpetrators know each other. Immediate reactions to sexual abuse include shock, fear or disbelief. Long-term symptoms include anxiety, fear or post-traumatic stress disorder (APA, 2011).

However, it has become a common trend across Nigeria and elsewhere in the continent like Africa for adults to abuse minors. In some cases, fathers abusing daughters alongside other adults. Child sexual abuse is grim fact of life. It is more common than most people realize. Girls and in a few cases boys, can be sexually abused by adults or older children who they know closely. The offender is usually known in eight out of ten reported cases (Ogbonna, 2013).

Although, there is no universal definition of child sexual abuse, however, a central characteristic of any abuse is the dominant position of an adult that allows him or her to force or coerce a child into sexual activity. Child sexual abuse may include fondling a child's genitals, masturbation, oral-genital contact, digital penetration, and vaginal and anal intercourse. Child sexual abuse is not solely restricted to physical contact; such abuse could include noncontact abuse, such as exposure, voyeurism, child pornography (APA, 2011).

Accurate statistics on the prevalence of child and adolescent sexual abuse are difficult to collect because of problems of underreporting and the lack of one definition of what constitutes such abuse. However, there is general agreement among mental health and child protection professionals that child sexual abuse is not uncommon and is a serious problem in the United States and even in Nigeria (APA, 2011). However, child sexual abuse has been reported up to 10,000 times a year, but the number of unreported instances is far greater, because the children are afraid to tell anyone what has happened, and the legal procedure for validating an episode is difficult. The problem should be identified, the abuse stopped, and the child should receive professional help.

The long-term emotional and psychological damage of sexual abuse can be devastating to the child. Child sexual abuse can take place within the family, by a parent, step-parent, sibling or other relative; or outside the home, for example, by a friend, neighbor, child care person, teacher, or stranger. When sexual abuse has occurred, a child can develop a variety of distressing feelings, thoughts and behaviours. No child is psychologically prepared to cope with repeated sexual stimulation. Even a two or three year old, who cannot know the sexual activity is wrong, will develop problems resulting from the inability to cope with the overstimulation (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, 2008).

One of the reasons for lack of information and low interest in the topic may have been the privacy of the act—usually occurring within families and involving further and daughter or between close relatives, other acquaintances and strangers. In other words, they are victims because of their powerlessness. However, sexual abuse by outsiders or strangers is more often made public than for instance, father / daughter or brother / sister incest. Since it is a criminal case or act, it is generally brought to the notice of the law enforcement agents and the law courts. In Nigeria, sexual abuse in form of rape is perceived as the most serious sexual crime. It is succinctly defined in the criminal code as: stated in Okonkwo and Nais (1980) as unlawful carnal knowledge of a girl or woman, without her consent or with her consent if the consent is obtained by force or by means of threat or intimidation of any kind, or by fear of any harm or by means of false and fraudulent representation as to the nature of act?

The maximum punishment for rape is life imprisonment, with or without whipping. According to the criminal code, defilement is defined as an unlawful carnal knowledge of a girl under the age of eighteen years. This offence against children is punishable by life imprisonment, with or without whipping. The law stipulates that prosecution for defilement should commence within two months after the offence is committed.

2.2 Protecting children from sexual abuse

- The typical advice "Don't Talk to Strangers" doesn't apply in this case. Most sexual perpetrators are known to their victims.
- Do not instruct children to give relatives hugs and kisses. Let them express affection on their own terms.
- Teach your children basic sexual education. Teach them that no one should touch the "private" parts of their body. A health professional can also help to communicate sex education to children if parents are uncomfortable doing so.
- Develop strong communication skills with your children. Encourage them to ask questions and talk about their experiences. Explain the importance of reporting abuse to you or another trusted adult.
- Teach your children that sexual advances from adults are wrong and against the law. Give them the confidence to assert themselves against any adult who attempts to abuse them.
- Make an effort to know children's friends and their families.
- Instruct your child to never get into a car with anyone without your permission.
- Teach your children that their bodies are their own. That it is OK to say they do not want a hug or that certain kinds of contact make them uncomfortable.
- It is important to remember that physical force is often not necessary to engage a child in sexual activity. Children are trusting and dependent and will often do what is asked of them to gain approval and love.

3.0 The Research Problem

Records from both Magistrate and High courts in Anambra state of Nigeria as well as information from prosecutors in the state reveal a high rate of sexual abuse of children involved in labour, like hawking of goods, baby sitting and house- keeping in both urban and rural areas.

This exploratory study was aimed at establishing the following:

- The incidence of defilement in Awka (the state capital) and its environs;
- The profiles of the victims and assailants; and
- The situational factors associated with the problem

3.1 Method

Information on defilement cases (data) were collated from the records at Department of Public Prosecution (SPP) of the state Ministry of Justice, Awka. A standard form was designed and used for the data extraction from each case file. Information on the victim, the assailant scene of crime, punishment and other relevant data was collected from files of all decided cases of defilement for a period of five years (2006-2010). Cases included were those in which the assailants were convicted. Also, cases in which the assailants accepted responsibility for the crime but were thrown out for want of evidence or awaiting judgement were also included. The data collection was done by the researchers with the full cooperation of State Director of Public Prosecution.

3.2 Result

In the 5 years period, 66 cases fitted the category of cases chosen. There were 8 cases in 2006, 12 in 2007, 15 in 2008, 15 in 2009, and 16 in 2010, a mean of 13 cases per year. The numbers of cases presented here do not in any way reflect the true incidence of defilement in Awka area, nor the total member of cases brought to the attention of the law courts yearly. The criteria for case acceptance and inclusion were intentionally conservative. In other words, many cases still pending in court at the time of the study and those with incomplete records were rejected. The 66 cases nevertheless provided an objective and good picture of the victim, the assailant and other basic features of sexual abuse of children.

The victims

The youngest victim was 5 and the oldest 11 years. The mean age was 7.6 years. Tables I to IV present the age of the victim and the corresponding age of the assailant.

Table I

Age of victims and assailant in each of the second group of 16 cases of defilement

Case No.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	X
Age of Victim	8	7	8	6	5	10	6	7	7	11	10	5	-	5	7	8	8
Age of Assailant	42	38	30	41	20	23	29	39	21	-	26	26	36	30	22	-	30.2

Table II

Age of victims and assailant in each of the second group of 16 cases of defilement

Case No.	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	32	X
Age of Victim	7	6	5	8	10	11	8	9	9	7	8	6	5	5	6	7	7.2
Age of Assailant	23	30	36	31	31	30	40	41	41	29	29	21	25	23	24	27	30

Table III

Age of victims and assailant in each of the third group of 16 cases defilement

Case No.	33	34	35	36	37	38	39	40	41	42	43	44	45	46	47	48	X
Age of Victim	7	7	6	8	9	10	8	9	7	6	5	5	-	6	7	9	7.2
Age of Assailant	31	36	32	20	24	21	29	33	30	22	25	-	26	-	29	30	27.7

Table IV

Age of victims and assailant in each of the last group of 18 cases defilement

Case No.	49	50	51	52	53	54	55	56	57	58	59	60	61	62	63	64	65	66
Age of Victim	9	7	6	-	7	7	6	8	11	10	6	6	-	8	7	10	11	-
Age of Assailant	30	29	-	22	21	31	32	-	-	33	38	40	34	22	24	20	-	26

Table V

Summary mean table of all the ages of victims and assailant in all the 66 cases of defilement

Total Number of Cases	66 cases
Mean age of all the victims	7.2 years
Mean age of all the assailants	28.3 years

Most victims of rape (children) live with both parents; 43 were living with either the parents or a close relative at the time of sexual abuse. On what the rape victim was doing as at the time of abuse or attack; 25 were on errand for parents / guardian, 10 were at home, 25 were hawking goods along the streets, 5 were playing and I was returning from school. There was no other information on the victims or their guardians/parents.

The assailant

The youngest assailant is 20 years old and the oldest is 42 years as shown in tables 1 to IV. The mean age was 28.3 years. Most of them (46) were either unskilled labourer, petty traders or blue colour workers, 5 were unemployed graduates, 6 were white colour workers, and 9 were students.

The assailant was related to the victim in 9 cases but the nature of the relationship was not revealed. In 38 cases, the victims and assailants were not related; no information was provided in 19 cases.

On whether the victim had known the assailant before the attack, 35 victims had known the assailant before the attack, 25 victims had no previous knowledge of their attackers, and information was not available for 6 victims.

Setting of crime and reporting

The crime was committed in the assailants' home (16 cases); victims' home (9), bush (2), assailants' shop (8); uncompleted houses / buildings (16); and information on the scene of the crime for 5 cases were not stated.

Reactions of assailant after arrest

The length of time between the commission of crime (rape) and arrest by police ranged from 1 day to 8 weeks. Most assailants (39) were arrested within one week, 16 of them were arrested within 24 hours after the commission of the crime.

On arrest by police, 42 assailants accepted full responsibility for the crime, while the remaining 24 denied committing the crime. Among those who owned up to the crime, 26 said the victims gave their consent, 12 attributed the act to the work of the Satan, and 4 blamed it on alcohol.

Punishment for the crime

Even though arrest of assailants by police was generally swift, cases remained in the law court for an average of 26.6 months. The time between arrest and judgement ranged from 13 to 52 months. Punishment for convicted assailants was generally severe. Most convicts were sent to jail for 3^{1/4} to 12 years with or without option of fine. Three were convicted of a lesser offence (indecent assent) and sentenced between 3 and 6 months with hard labour. Five cases were struck out for want of evidence and two assailants were discharged on psychiatric grounds. It is pertinent to observe that though the law stipulates life imprisonment for convicts, no assailant (convict) received this sentence.

4. What to do if you think a child you know has been the victim of sexual abuse

- Give the child a safe environment in which to talk to you or another trusted adult. Encourage the child to talk about what he or she has experienced, but be careful not to suggest events to him or her that may not have happened. Guard against displaying emotions that would influence the child's telling of the information.
- Reassure the child that he or she did nothing wrong.
- Seek mental health assistance for the child.
- Arrange for a medical examination for the child. Select a medical provider who has experience in examining children and identifying sexual and physical trauma. It may be necessary to explain to the child the difference between a medical examination and the abuse incident.
- Be aware that many states have laws requiring that persons who know or have a reason to suspect that a child has been sexually abused must report that abuse to either local law enforcement officials or child protection officials. In all 36 states and the FCT, medical personnel, mental health professionals, teachers, and law enforcement personnel's are required by law to report suspected abuse.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The study was aimed at exploring cases of sexual abuse of children in the Awka area of Anambra State of Nigeria. Information (data) from the police, state prosecutors, and social welfare officials had earlier revealed a high rate of crime (sexual abuse) in Awka and its environs. Data collected from the Department of Public Prosecutions (DPP) does not present clear information on incidence rate. Analyses of data from 66 files of decided cases were conducted to delineate victims and assailant characteristics. Selected characteristics of the crime, reactions of the assailants and punishment are reported.

The average rape victim was 7 years old and living with her parents at the time of crime. The diversity in the setting of the crimes, the activities engaged in before the attack (crime), and the fact that most victims lived with one or both parents also do not support the stereotype of the victim as an abandoned child without home or family. What these data and other reports from informed periodicals imply is that almost every child is vulnerable to being sexually abused by parents, relatives, caretakers, employers and strangers. While, children are different from one another in diverse ways, they share a similar feature of helplessness and powerlessness.

Essentially, it is because of this lack of power and its impact that make legal protection for children a compelling necessity in Nigeria and elsewhere. Where law does not exist, they must be enacted. Where they do exist, they should be enforced. Sanctions and punishment for sexual or any form of child abuse should be swift, severe and certain.

Furthermore, the psychological impacts of sexual victimization demand the urgent attention of social welfare officers and mental health personnel. Kinard (1979) has posited that the consequential outcomes of abuse are nebulous-subtle in their manifestation, difficult to determine without psychological evaluation, insidious in their potential damage to the child. He further argues that sexually abused child may develop a negative view of self. He or She may feel used and worthless; may develop a destructive view of his or her own sexuality, and may be unable to trust others. In other words, it is pertinent to note that these symptoms and assertions are based on clinical evidence and therefore portend serious dangers, and crises in the adult life of the abused child.

It is because of dearth of epidemiological data, that one can only speculate on the state of the child in Africa particularly Nigeria regarding psychological and physical abuse. Increased family stress caused by changes in the socio-economic fortunes of parents may predispose children to abuse and neglect. Ritual practices in form of ritual killings for economic gains and political power may also be a factor in child sexual abuse. In this regard, further research in this area is called for. The exploratory nature of this study has left some questions unanswered. The reaction of victims, the reasons for failure to report many cases, beliefs associated with some forms of child abuse, the incidence of father-daughter incest and so on demand empirical investigations. A single source of data as is the case with this study may not provide all the answers. Thus, a combination of methods of data collection is suggested to be a better option.

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