

Research in Social Change

DESTITUTION AND PROSTITUTION IN NIGERIAN URBAN AREAS: EVIDENCE FROM PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND ECONOMIC PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract

The impact of the problems of destitution and prostitution on the moral fabric of society cannot be overemphasized and thus calls for the attention of the relevant stakeholders (the government, civil society, and professionals) in restoring moral values and decency to our societies. This study is centered on the psychological, social, and economic impact that the activities of the destitute and prostitutes have both on the individual and the society at large. The study found that many individuals resort to begging on the streets because they are either physically challenged, lack basic necessities for decent living, have many dependents, or are the breadwinners of their families while at the same time receive little or no support from family and friends. While the above was the case for the destitute, others engaged in prostitution due to peer pressure, financial pressure from family and friends, greed, and marital issues, etc. It was also found that the problems of destitution and prostitution tend to be more prevalent in urban areas due to the increasing levels of economic activities in the cities, which therefore leads to more patronage. To avert the negative effects of the problems of destitution and prostitution in society and to completely wean those involved away from it, the study recommends the coordination of efforts by the government, psychologists, and social workers to help train and equip the victims with the skills necessary to assist them in forgoing their old lifestyle completely.

Keywords

destitution • prostitution • urban • Nigeria • society

JEL Classification: I32 • I38 • P46

1. Introduction

The problem of destitution and prostitution in Nigeria's urban areas has continued to impact society mentally, physically, socially, economically, and psychologically, especially due to the continuous geometrical increase in the country's population and given the fact that these activities tend to be carried out mostly in densely populated areas of the cities. Many scholars have projected that in the nearest future, given the current economic condition in Nigeria and the increasing population of the destitute and prostitutes, this disconcerting trend will soon reach a height where it cannot be controlled. According to the United Nations International Children Education Fund (UNICEF 2003) report, each year about a million young people across the globe are forced into prostitution, thus increasing the overall number of young people engaged in prostitution globally to the tune of about

ten million. In many African countries, including Nigeria, where engaging in prostitution is a social and cultural taboo, the huge number of people now engaged in the trade in plain sight now poses a serious social concern (Ogunkan and Fawole 2010). More so, Yusuf (2013) argues that the number of young females engaged in prostitution and the attendant social vices it creates is on the rise. This is worrisome, given how the presence of these people (beggars and prostitutes) constitute a conspicuous menace on our streets and deface the aesthetic beauty of towns that successive governments have been trying to uphold and maintain. While the destitute/beggars usually occupy the heart of the ever-busy towns like markets, school premises, churches, and banks, where people can easily notice and patronize them, prostitutes, on the other hand, are subtler in their approaches. They are mostly seen at night around major hotels, brothels

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and roads where they try to solicit clients and patronage. Their activities not only impact the health and safety of the individual involved in this business, but also that of the people who patronize them. This in turn constitutes a health risk and a nuisance to the environment and thus also debases the moral fabric of society at large.

Generally, destitution is a state of severe poverty in which the person concerned depends on the goodwill of others for survival as well as charity from the public and welfare packages, either from the government or non-governmental agencies. The destitute are people who are extremely poor and lacking the means of meeting their needs; examples include beggars, the disabled without support from family, and accident victims and/or victims of natural disasters such as drought-triggered famine. Destitution in the contemporary British context refers to the homeless (i.e. people who sleep on the streets, have no work or possessions, are without family or friends to turn to, or have few material goods with no social assets). According to the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, destitution includes the state of being destitute of resources; want for life's necessities, lacking/deprived of the power to do something, the action of deserting or forsaking, which suggests social marginalization, thus making destitution an individual human experience. In the past, the population of the destitute were elderly people, but the recent increase in Fulani herders' migration/terrorist attacks, especially in rural areas, have included youths and the children among the number of people in search of a means of survival and livelihood. As Jelili (2009) posits, in eradicating extreme poverty and hunger in Nigeria, which is in line with the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG), it is proper to first address the rising incidences of begging in the cities, which is now a problem. As a matter of fact, street begging not only constitutes a nuisance to the physical and social environment in many cities in Nigeria, but also a reliance on this activity as a means of livelihood in the long run is a waste of human resources and constitutes a burden on the already overstretched low-income earners that make up the mainstream of the entire work force. Moreover, the poverty rate in Nigeria has increased tremendously as a result of the inactions of those elected into the leadership positions of Nigeria, such that people are ready to commit all kinds of scandalous crimes, including prostitution, to survive. The government established the National Poverty Eradication Program (NAPEP), aimed at eradicating poverty at the grass roots level, but unfortunately, there are still a substantial number of able-bodied people who depend on begging from others to earn a living. Thus, NAPEP failed due to poor management of the fund. Despite the efforts of the different tiers of government to alleviate poverty and sometimes destitution, the problem still continues unsolved.

Prostitution as the earliest profession in the world can be traced to the year 2400 BC in ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Rome, Greece, and pre-Columbian Peru; and there is evidence from prehistoric times suggesting the existence of sexual liberalism and prostitution before sex became monetized. In the nineteenth century and during the Middle Ages, legal brothels were an important source of revenue tax in Europe; hence prostitution was tolerated as a necessary evil. However, prostitution in African society can be traced to the period of the Stone Age, where slave masters used their female slaves as sex toys and sex workers. Apart from this, the female slaves were also reckoned social outcasts, and it was hard for women with dignity to be involved in it (Yusuf 2013).

In other words, with the advancement in information and communication technologies in the twenty-first century, prostitution has taken a new turn with social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Whatsapp, Wechat, etc., thereby introducing and making electronic sex a viable option for some young people. Sexual liberalism and commercial sex work/online sex have increased with the innovation of online dating platforms where people could choose and view from the array of numerous nude pictures and pornographic videos just by paying. According to Weitzer (2009), what motivates men to pay for sex includes the desire to have sex with someone having a certain physical appearance (age, race, and body type); the desire to have sex without any emotional commitment; the thrill of having sex with a prostitute; and dissatisfaction with or lack of a sexual partner. This includes a desire for a sex pattern that the partner cannot guarantee. Weitzer (2013) is of the view that prostitution is a form of gender oppression, which can possibly be termed a deviant behavior. Nonetheless, Harcourt and Donovan (2005) identified several forms of sex work using worksites, sexual practices, and major strategies of soliciting for clients as a yardstick. These include:

- i. **Escort workers:** They reach their clients by means of telephone through the hotel staff who serve as their agents or middlemen; because of the low customer base and their exclusive home service to clients, they are relatively expensive.
- ii. **Club, bar, and dance hall workers:** They frequent club houses, dancing halls, and bars to solicit for customers.
- iii. **Beer girls:** They are girls employed in bars and pubs to sell and promote their goods, who also engage in commercial sex with clients in order to supplement their pay.
- iv. **Opportunistic girls:** This class of women may refute the prostitute toga, because they indulge in sex with wealthy clients once in a while for favours.
- v. **Femmes libres:** They consist of single or divorced women who exchange sexual services for gifts, which, in the long run they may convert to cash.