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## “Child Witches”: Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Homeless Girls in South-Southern Nigeria

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## “Child Witches”: Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Homeless Girls in South-Southern Nigeria

### Abstract

Sexual exploitation and abuse of girls is one of the endemic social problems in Nigeria. Although this problem has attracted much research attention in recent times, some newly emerged factors contributing to the problem have been mostly ignored. This study explored how the abandonment of children following their stigmatization as *witches* contributes to sexual exploitation and abuse of the girls in the Akwa Ibom and Cross River states of Nigeria. The study was based on the qualitative research paradigm. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews of three senior staff members of the Child’s Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN)—a children’s charity that manages a shelter for children abandoned as witches. Thematic analysis was conducted and five principal themes were developed from the data, which are (1) vulnerable to statutory rape; (2) living with sexual addiction; (3) targeted for human trafficking; (4) vulnerable to infections and pregnancy; and (5) exposed to intergenerational abuse. Theme (1) is concerned with how the girls are frequently raped by different groups of men due to the girls’ presence on the street. Theme (2) shows how the girls struggle with sexual addiction following frequent exposure to sexual activities since the early years of their lives. Theme (3) details how human traffickers target the girls for the sex trade, labor and other purposes. Theme (4) shows how the girls struggle with sexually transmitted infections and sometimes, pregnancy. Theme (5) details how the stigmatization and the consequent abuse of the stigmatized girls on the street also extend to their children, who are automatically regarded as the children of witches. Recommendations were made on how to address this social problem.

### Keywords

Child witch, stigmatization, statutory rape, sexual exploitation, sex addiction, infection, pregnancy, human trafficking

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**“CHILD WITCHES”: SEXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE OF HOMELESS GIRLS IN SOUTH-SOUTHERN NIGERIA****Chima Agazue***University of Huddersfield, UK* <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2995-0179>**ABSTRACT**

Sexual exploitation and abuse of girls is one of the endemic social problems in Nigeria. Although this problem has attracted much research attention in recent times, some newly emerged factors contributing to the problem have been mostly ignored. This study explored how the abandonment of children following their stigmatization as *witches* contributes to sexual exploitation and abuse of the girls in the Akwa Ibom and Cross River states of Nigeria. The study was based on the qualitative research paradigm. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews of three senior staff members of the Child’s Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN)—a children’s charity that manages a shelter for children abandoned as witches. Thematic analysis was conducted and five principal themes were developed from the data, which are (1) vulnerable to statutory rape; (2) living with sexual addiction; (3) targeted for human trafficking; (4) vulnerable to infections and pregnancy; and (5) exposed to intergenerational abuse. Theme (1) is concerned with how the girls are frequently raped by different groups of men due to the girls’ presence on the street. Theme (2) shows how the girls struggle with sexual addiction following frequent exposure to sexual activities since the early years of their lives. Theme (3) details how human traffickers target the girls for the sex trade, labor and other purposes. Theme (4) shows how the girls struggle with sexually transmitted infections and sometimes, pregnancy. Theme (5) details how the stigmatization and the consequent abuse of the stigmatized girls on the street also extend to their children, who are automatically regarded as the children of witches. Recommendations were made on how to address this social problem.

**KEYWORDS**

Nigeria, child witch, stigmatization, statutory rape, sexual exploitation, sex addiction, infection, pregnancy, human trafficking

**S**EXUAL EXPLOITATION AND ABUSE of children and young people is a global reality (Andrews, 2004; Flowers, 2001; Murray et al., 2014) that manifests in different ways. Although children, in general, face sexual exploitation and abuse, the situation is worse for girls than boys as documented by the United Nations International Children’s Fund (UNICEF) (UN News, 2018) and the World Health Organization (WHO, 2010) and supported by academic reports (Akin-Odanye, 2018; Asscher et al., 2015; Kinnear, 2007; Ogunyemi, 2000; Tade & Udechukwu, 2020) in this area. Further, whilst both boys and girls may experience sexual abuse, girls not only are more frequently subjected to sexual abuse but additionally experience sexual harassment, sexual assault and rape (Kinnear, 2007; Tade & Udechukwu, 2020). Of all 331 rape

reports in Nigeria analyzed by Tade & Udechukwu (2020), male victims constituted only four percent. As of 2014, UNICEF (UN News, 2018) estimated that no less than 120 million girls below the age of 20 around the world had been forced into sexual intercourse or the performance of other sexual acts. Sexual exploitation is defined by WHO (n.d.) as follows:

Actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, power, or trust, for sexual purposes, including, but not limited to, profiting monetarily, socially or politically from the sexual exploitation of another.

Based on its 1999 Consultation on Child Abuse Prevention, WHO (2010) defines child sexual abuse as follows:

Child sexual abuse is the involvement of a child in sexual activity that he or she does not fully comprehend, is unable to give informed consent to, or for which the child is not developmentally prepared and cannot give consent, or that violates the laws or social taboos of society (WHO, 2010, p.16).

This activity can occur between an adult and a child or between a child and another child and may involve coercion, exploitation in the form of prostitution, or any unlawful sexual practices and exploitation in the form of pornographic performance and materials (WHO, 2010). The above definitions suggest that sexual exploitation involves sexual abuse. Sexual exploitation of children and young people is fueled by a variety of factors, such as unemployment and poverty (Cluver et al., 2011; Evans, 2010), pedophilia (Seto, 2012), exposure to sexual exploitation or sexual abuse (Cluver et al., 2011; Nixon et al., 2002) armed conflict or war (Min-Harris, 2010), displacement (Ward & March, 2006), orphanhood (Cluver et al., 2011; Evans, 2010), parent's or guardian's illness or death (Cluver et al., 2011), dysfunctional government (Min-Harris, 2010) globalization (Danailova-Trainor & Belser, 2006), sex tourism (Ennew, 1986; Flowers, 2001) and the legalization of prostitution in the society (Cho et al., 2012; Farley, 2009). The contributions of new information and communication technologies have also been identified (Latonero et al., 2012; O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011). Access to technologies such as the internet is said to have created new methods of grooming children by adults (Eneman et al., 2010; Wolak et al., 2004). It is also worth acknowledging here that some girls and women are forced into prostitution (Hughes & Denisova, 2001; Kelly, 2003) or tricked (Hughes & Denisova, 2001) into it with or without necessarily experiencing the aforementioned issues.

Whilst several factors contributing to the sexual exploitation and abuse of children have been documented as demonstrated above, little is known about the contributions of the child witch stigmatization in sexual exploitation and abuse. The notion of the child witch is not restricted to Nigeria; it is currently a social problem in many parts of Africa. Thus, it is necessary to make reference to these other African countries in order to demonstrate historical developments beyond Nigeria. This will be discussed under the next subheading.

The previous investigation by Cimpric (2010) for UNICEF found that sexual exploitation, sexual violence and sexually transmitted infections (STIs) are among the common experiences of the child witches. More recently, UNICEF (2017) has similarly acknowledged the child witch phenomenon as a new cultural issue contributing to sexual exploitation and abuse in Nigeria. However, none of these reports explored these issues in depth, rather they focus on general factors contributing to the belief

that children are witches, the maltreatment of the victims, and other consequences faced by the victims, of which sexual exploitation and abuse forms a part. This current article, therefore, aims to explore in depth “why” and “how” the child witch label promotes sexual exploitation and abuse. Although the sexual exploitation and abuse connected to the child witch stigmatization may mimic sexual exploitation and abuse connected to homelessness, such as the cases of street children, there are unique circumstances with respect to the child witches based on their status as “outcasts” that can be hardly found in existing academic reports. This current article aims to uncover these through semi-structured interviews of staff members of the Child’s Rights and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN). CRARN is described in the “methods” section of this article.

### **Child Witchcraft in Contemporary Africa**

Traditionally, children were not usually associated with witchcraft practices in African societies (La Fontaine, 2009). However, this later changed. Known cases are at least 100 years old (Covington, 2015). The earliest child witches on the continent were confined to a couple of clans or tribes, such as the Bangwa (Cameroon) in the 1950s (Brain, 1970), the Maka (Cameroon) in the 1960s (Fisiy & Geschiere, 1990), the Sudanese Azande (Central African Republic, CAR) in the 1970s (Evans-Pritchard, 1976) and a few others. In addition to being confined to specific clans or tribes, the existence of some of these child witches was also short lived.

In the 1990s, a “new” type of child witch emerged on the continent (Agazue, 2020; Javier, 2005; Tweneboah, 2020; van der Meer, 2013) viewed by people as dangerous as adult witches and capable of causing misfortunes to their families and communities (Agazue, 2015; 2020; Agazue & Gavin, 2015; Cimpric, 2010; Cooney, 2019; Javier, 2005; van der Meer, 2013). The emergence of the new child witches has led to an increasing hunting of children as witches in different parts of Africa. The social affairs minister of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), Bernard Ndjunga, estimated that whilst the streets of Kinshasa had up to 50,000 homeless children, even more children were held as witches in churches by pastors (Keeble, 2010). The number of accused child witches in Malawi is estimated to run into several hundred every year (van der Meer, 2013).

In Nigeria, child witchcraft is also a serious social problem (Agazue, 2015; 2020; Cooney, 2019; Ekpenyong & Udisi, 2016), particularly in Akwa Ibom and Cross River states where up to 15,000 children were estimated to have been branded witches in 2008 (BBC News, n.d.). Hundreds of children continue to appear on the streets every year since then to date as abandoned child witches whilst others are murdered. Child witchcraft is equally serious in Ghana (Adinkrah, 2011; Quansah, 2012; Tweneboah, 2020). Agyapong (2020) observed that the Gnani witch camp had 616 children compared to only 105 men and 313 women, which prompted him to conclude that children are more targeted than adults in the current Ghanaian witch hunt. It is important to note that the Gnani witch camp was only one of the six witch camps existent in Ghana as of 2019. This means there could be more child witches elsewhere, including Angola, Burkina Faso, Benin, Chad, Gabon, Tanzania, South Africa, Mali, Uganda and CAR (Bussien et al., 2011). It is possible that this problem might have spread to more countries recently.

The forces of globalization have meant that the phenomenon of the child witch in contemporary Africa and the consequent maltreatment and murder of children are also witnessed outside the African continent, particularly in the UK (Agazue, 2015; Keeble, 2010), where African revivalist Pentecostal churches are known as a driving

factor for this problem (Agyapong, 2020; Cimpric, 2010; Geschiere, 2020; Mildnerová, 2016; Nyika, 2020; Priest et al., 2020; Quansah, 2012; van der Meer, 2013) currently proliferate (Agazue, 2015). Witchcraft-related abuses, including murders by African families in the UK, have also been documented (Agazue, 2015).

In Nigeria, this social problem is mostly witnessed in two of the 36 states in the country. These states are Akwa Ibom and Cross River (Agazue, 2015; 2020; Cookey, 2019; Ekpenyong & Udisi, 2016). Incidents occasionally occur in some of their bordering states, which reflect the influences of the cultural beliefs and practices of these two states on their neighbors. Incidents are also witnessed among Akwa Ibom or Cross River indigenes living in other states. This is similar to incidents occurring in countries outside Africa due to the presence of Africans in the diaspora who are tied to this culture (Agazue, 2015; Keeble, 2010). The concentration of these incidents in the two aforementioned states is connected to home movies and particular religious organizations that spread this belief (Agazue, 2020; Cookey, 2019). Agazue (2020) found that the marketing of these movies and their effects as well as the activities of witch-hunting pastors belonging to particular religious organizations, are mostly limited to the states of Akwa Ibom and Cross River, partly explaining the concentration of the incidents.

Children of all ages and genders are targeted (Agazue, 2020; Cookey, 2019; Javier, 2005). A broad range of behaviors and impairments are relied upon to identify the child witches, such as being too dirty, disrespectful, stubborn, impolite, selfish, solitary, malnourished, domineering, or being epileptic, mentally retarded, or a sleep-walker. (Agazue, 2020; Javier, 2005). Children are even targeted for being too crafty (Agazue, 2020; Cookey, 2019; Javier, 2005). These children are often treated inhumanely. Academic reports from different parts of Africa consistently show that child witches are frequently abandoned, maimed, tormented or killed (Adinkrah, 2011; Agazue, 2015; Agazue & Gavin, 2015; Cimpric, 2010; Cookey, 2019; Ekpenyong & Udisi, 2016; Javier, 2005). Acid baths, poisoning, slaughtering, drowning, live burial, live burning (Agazue & Gavin, 2015; Ekpenyong & Udisi, 2016), being tied to a tree, locked up in a room, forced to sleep with a human corpse (Cookey, 2019) and other inhumane treatments are also commonplace. These are done as part of punishments or to extract confessions (Agazue, 2020; Cookey, 2019).

While many children are murdered following the witchcraft-related accusations, others survive and for those who survive, particularly the abandoned ones, their childhood experiences are markedly different from those of their peers. They are very likely to face stigmatization and discrimination for life (Cimpric, 2010). Many live on the street as a result (Agazue, 2020; Cookey, 2019; Ekpenyong & Udisi, 2016; van der Meer, 2013). Stigmatized girls may resort to survival sex as a way to survive on the street (van der Meer, 2013). The accused children are also vulnerable to alcohol and drug abuse, physical and sexual violence, sexual exploitation and STIs (Cimpric, 2010).

Religion is the main driving factor of the child witch phenomenon (Adinkrah, 2011; Agazue, 2015; 2020; Cookey, 2019; Javier, 2005). The leaders of Pentecostal and syncretic churches, in addition to traditional votaries, are among the key players, convincing parents and caregivers that their children or the children under their care are witches (Adinkrah, 2011; Agazue, 2015; 2020; Cookey, 2019; Cimpric, 2010). In 2009, thirteen Pentecostal churches and about a 100 pastors of such churches were named in case files of a particular review involving child witch accusations in Nigeria (Huffington Post, 2009). A similar report was also published about Angola where 11

fundamentalist churches were “shut down” because of this social problem (The New York Times, 2007). Human Rights Watch (2006) counted approximately 2,000 churches performing exorcism ceremonies in Mbuji-Mayi (DRC) alone, with an even greater number of churches doing the same in Kinshasa (DRC). Several other cases of this nature are also detailed by Agazue (2020) based on the reports of aid workers in this field and media analysis, which consistently suggest that the labeling of children as witches is a source of money for the pastors. After 11 fundamentalist churches were shut down in Angola due to child witch labeling and committees formed by villages to protect children, the number of abused and abandoned children “dropped drastically” according to the authorities (The New York Times, 2007).

The biblical phrase “thou shalt not suffer a witch to live” (Exodus, 22:18) is widely quoted by pastors who promote child witch hunting (Adu-Gyamfi, 2016; Agazue, 2015; 2020; Cookey, 2019) to convince their adherents that killing witches is a religious obligation in a way similar to how it was used by the Puritans to justify witch hunting in British America in the seventeenth century (Rosen, 2017) and in early modern Europe (Goodare, 2016). Although the reference to this biblical verse may seem to suggest that the pastors are acting on genuine belief, this is not always the case. Whilst some pastors may genuinely believe that children are witches in line with the traditional lore as well as their own poor level of understanding of the abnormalities and aberrant behaviors in children (Agazue, 2015; 2020) many pastors draw on this extant belief to perpetuate fear and capitalize on their adherents’ fear of witches to make money (Agazue, 2015, 2020; Cimpric, 2010; Javier, 2005; Priest et al., 2020). Cases abound wherein parents were charged huge sums of money by pastors in order to spiritually assess and/or exorcise their children. BBC News (2010) reported how a witch-hunting Nigerian pastor was arrested after demanding more than US \$250 for a single exorcism. A Nigerian mother was reportedly charged US \$270 by her prophet who denounced her eight-year-old daughter as a witch and exorcised her. Another woman who tried to saw off the top of her daughter’s skull following her denunciation by a pastor was charged US \$60 for her exorcism (Huffington Post, 2009).

According to Javier’s (2005, p.28) report for the Save the Children organization based on a study conducted in the DRC: “We have not come across a single church in which exorcisms and/or healing for witchcraft is free” (p.28). Exorcism is “a profit-making frenzy organized in response to parents’ concerns’ in the DRC (Javier, 2005, p.28). These pastors succeed easily in these frauds because their adherents often believe that they hear directly from God, therefore, they respect them a great deal and treat their words as messages from God (Agazue, 2015; 2016a; 2016b).

Although religion is the major driving factor of this social problem, Agazue’s (2020) study also identified some ulterior motives on the part of parents and guardians, which suggest that religion is simply used for “legitimization” purposes by individuals who might not believe that the children under the care are witches. This study that focused on the activities of women in relation to the child witch phenomenon found that stepmothers wanting to eliminate their stepchildren; prostitutes who see their children as a burden; aunts who consider their orphaned relatives as a burden; spinsters, widows and divorcees desperate for new husbands and biological mothers who are too poor to take care of their children often take advantage of this extant belief (Ibid.). These women are fond of taking their children to religious leaders and suggesting to the religious leaders that the children exhibit the major characteristics attributable to child witchcraft in their communities in order for the pastor to label the child a witch (Ibid.). The women seek the endorsement of these religious leaders because they are trusted as having the power to detect witches (Ibid.). This

endorsement is important because killing a child is a taboo that would normally attract the anger of community members but once the child is labeled as a witch by a person considered as an authority in the field (i.e., a religious leader), the perpetrator is very likely to evade justice. This means that not only would community members not question the offender, but they might also fail to report to police or refuse to assist with the investigation once police had become aware of the incident. Agazue (2020) then argues that the extant belief in child witchcraft promoted by pastors and spiritualists in different parts of Africa is exploited by individuals to abuse, abandon or kill unwanted children or children considered to be a burden.

Collectively, these abuses violate the rights of children in different ways. According to the UN General Assembly in its Declaration of the Rights of the Child (1959), children have the right to protection, healthcare, education, shelter and good nutrition. These same rights are also emphasized in the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in 1989. The African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC, 1990) is another relevant instrument in this matter. The ACRWC seeks to uphold the rights of children just as does the CRC (e.g., right to education, health, nutrition, protection), taking into account certain issues peculiar to Africa even though such issues are not generalisable to African societies (e.g., apartheid).

Nigeria domesticated the provisions of the CRC by promulgating the Child Rights Act (CRA) in 2003 (Aransiola et al., 2009), which 26 of the 36 Nigerian states have domesticated (Nzarga, 2016). As noted by the Bar Human Rights Committee (BHRC, 2013) of England and Wales, the CRA supersedes all other legislations connected to the rights of the child in Nigeria. The CRA specifies the rights and responsibilities of children as well as the duties and obligations of parents, government, organizations and other authorities towards children (Ibid.). The CRA in its various sections mandates that necessary care and protection shall be given to a child in order to ensure his/her wellbeing and that any individual, organization or authority dealing with a child shall act in the best interest of that child. It entrenches the fundamental rights of the child, such as the child's rights to a name, survival and development, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, freedom of association and peaceful assembly, freedom from discrimination, freedom of movement, upholding of dignity, right to education, good health, access to healthcare services, parental care and protection amongst others.

Despite the domestication of the UN CRC by Nigeria in the form of the CRA, child abuse is commonplace in the country. The child witch stigmatization and inhumane treatment of children, including murder, are commonplace in the states of Akwa Ibom and Cross River – two states that have domesticated the CRA (BHRC, 2013; Nzarga, 2016). It can be argued that child witch-related abuses incorporate almost all other types of abuse. Whilst some children are killed outright following accusations, others are tormented and/or abandoned, and the freedom of movement and association of the latter group is restricted to certain areas, as banished elements. Their right to dignity is violated. Their right to health is jeopardized. They have no parental care and protection. Their right to education is not guaranteed amongst others. The sexual exploitation and other abuses suffered whilst on the street which are the main focus of this article constitute an extension of the violations of the rights and freedom of these children. The CRA is explicit that the “best interest” of the child shall be paramount in any matters concerning a child. Unfortunately, this stigmatization and its consequences are not in the best interest of the child.



## Sexual Exploitation and Abuse of Girls in Nigeria

Sexual abuse and exploitation of girls is a serious problem in Nigeria (Akin-Odanye, 2018; Kunnuji & Esiet, 2015; Manyike et al., 2015; Odeyemi et al., 2016; Ogunyemi, 2000). UNICEF data (2017) suggests that one in four Nigerian girls are victims of sexual violence. Up to 678 cases of rape were recorded by the Lagos State Police Command in a period of one year (March 2012 – March 2013) (Tade & Udechukwu, 2020). Sexual abuse does not necessarily have to be violent or penetrative as the definition by WHO above suggests. Thus, when one considers other forms of sexual abuse, such as indecent exposure, the rate of sexual abuse could be higher than the estimate provided by UNICEF (2017), and above and beyond the recorded cases of rape in Lagos. It is to be noted that Nigerians underreport crimes (Ayodele & Aderinto, 2014) suggesting that actual incidents could be higher in number than recorded ones.

Some interesting studies have been conducted on girls and young women in Nigerian communities and schools regarding their experiences of sexual abuse in different forms. It is worth stating that these studies included girls aged 18 and 19 who are not children based on the CRA (2003) definition of a child in Nigeria as a person below 18 years of age, which is in line with the UN's guidelines. This is also the legal age of consent for sexual activities and marriage as stipulated in the CRA. Three studies discussed below (Kunnuji & Esiet, 2015; Manyike et al., 2015; Odeyemi et al., 2016) included school-age adolescents up to age nineteen. Nevertheless, these studies provide important insight into the extent of this problem considering that the vast majority of the participants in all cases were below the age of 18. It is also possible that some experiences detailed by the 18- and 19-year-old women occurred before they turned eighteen.

Manyike et al.'s (2015) cross-sectional study of 506 girls selected from secondary schools in two different Nigerian states (Enugu and Ebonyi) found that 40 percent of them had been sexually abused. The most common form of abuse was exposure to sexually-explicit materials. Kunnuji and Esiet's (2015) survey of sexual abuse among 480 out-of-school adolescents in the Iwaya community in Lagos State found that 14 percent of them had experienced rape while 35 percent had experienced statutory rape (i.e., as minors). Kunnuji and Esiet (2015) found a link between the incidents and the age of the study participants (older) and between the socioeconomic status of the victims (socioeconomically deprived) and the family conditions (orphan status) of the victims. The bracketed factors predicted higher chances of victimization.

Although Manyike et al. (2015) could not establish a link between abuse and the victim's age and socioeconomic status, it is worth stating that the majority (70%) of their participants were between 15 and 19 years and from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. In other words, they were already almost grown-up girls and young women, yet experienced minor forms of sexual abuse compared to Kunnuji and Esiet's (2015) participants. A possible explanation for this difference could be the differing circumstances of the victims. The former group was in school while the latter group was out of school. It was possible that being out of school meant the latter group had more time with and more exposure to men or boys who victimized them.

Similarly, Odeyemi et al. (2016) surveyed 350 out-of-school female adolescents who worked at Soundgrouse Market in Lagos on their experiences of sexual abuse. They found that 42.9 percent of the participants had had sexual intercourse and that 36.3 percent stated that their first intercourse was through coercion, while 15.8 percent reported forced initiation with only 12.3 percent stating that they desired the

sexual intercourse. The aforementioned percentages of sexual activities through coercion and forced initiation seem high and more closely resemble those experienced by Kunnuji and Esiet's (2015) participants compared to Manyike et al.'s (2015) participants. Again, these differences can also be attributed to the same aforementioned out-of-school factors. The possible reasons for the high rate of sexual abuse of girls in Nigeria will be provided in the latter paragraphs.

The high rate of sexual exploitation and abuse in Nigeria also means that some schools, hostels and orphanages are not safe for girls. For example, images and tales of Nigerian school teachers and school staff raping schoolgirls in classrooms, school toilets and hostels often appear in the mass media and social media. The discovery of how little girls at the Light of Hope Orphanage in Akute, Ogun state were being serially raped by the founder who had run the institution since 1996 until this case came to light in 2013, was detailed by Punch (2013) news online. The poor children had reported what was happening to them to several people but were unable to get help. One employee who confronted the manager was immediately sacked by the manager who reportedly continued with this crime. This is only one example to illustrate a situation which is believed to be endemic in the country. Similar cases are detailed by Agazue (2015; 2016a) including those committed by religious leaders. Sexual exploitation and abuse in Nigeria are exacerbated by the fact that Nigeria has no national register for the purposes of tracking sex offenders and thus potentially saving their victims.

The armed conflict in the northern part of Nigeria is another factor promoting sexual exploitation and abuse in the country. Cases of sexual exploitation, abuse and rape of dozens of women and girls living in camps for internally displaced persons (IDPs) (those fleeing attacks by Boko Haram terrorists and other violent criminals) in Maiduguri, Borno state, were recorded by Human Rights Watch (2016). A situational assessment of IDPs by Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala's (NOI) Polls in the region in July 2016 found that 66 percent of the 400 displaced persons in three states in northeastern Nigeria (where Boko Haram terrorists are active) reported that the women and girls at the camps were being sexually abused by camp officials. Among the perpetrators were government officials, soldiers, police officers, vigilante groups and camp leaders. The women were sexually abused with promises of marriage, provision of food items, and financial assistance (Human Rights Watch, 2016).

Aggressive sexual advances towards girls and women, verbal abuse of a sexual nature, and fondling are commonly witnessed in Nigeria even in some busy locations. Law enforcement officials are not exempt from these unlawful and deviant behaviors. In some particular transport terminals where touts are known to congregate, the breasts of a girl or woman is sometimes openly fondled by these touts. Although such behavior is normally frowned upon by members of the public, it is witnessed in some particular areas where nothing might be done by bystanders who may live in fear for their own safety from young men who are almost always ready to fight and injure anyone at will. In such locations, girls and women apply discernment to decide how to navigate through the public sphere and may sometimes seek an unofficial guard in the form of any available man they trust, as a deterrent to the touts. In addition to avoiding such busy locations, Nigerian girls and women tend to avoid certain pathways or seek a male guard for fear of sexual assault.

Police corruption is another factor that inadvertently facilitates sexual abuse and assault in Nigeria. Police corruption is endemic in Nigeria (Agazue, 2015; Mudasiru & Fatai, 2020; Oluwaniyi, 2009; Orole et al., 2015). Whilst there are decent and

responsible police officers in Nigeria, the high level of rascality of many police officers in the country has been an issue of concern for decades. Often, the difference between police officers assigned a duty to protect members of the public and violent criminals is only the former's uniform. In October 2020, there was a nationwide protest in Nigeria with the hashtag #EndSARS designed to protest wanton brutality of innocent citizens, extrajudicial killings of citizens, and robbery and extortion committed by members of a police unit known as Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), which was immediately disbanded following the protest. SARS was founded in 1992 by a retired commissioner of police, Simeon Danladi Midenda to combat violent criminals, such as armed robbers and kidnappers. The police in general had been engaging in anti-robbery operations prior to the establishment of this special squad (Ogbette et al., 2018). The SARS police unit was reputed to have the necessary skills to combat these violent criminals, thus, they are usually deployed when such violent crimes occur and they are capable of achieving quick success (Ogbette et al., 2018).

Unfortunately, the SARS team suddenly became very corrupt and began to operate with impunity. Often, members of the SARS team accused innocent citizens of being criminals with the purpose of extorting them of their cash or valuables whilst threatening them at gunpoint in what may rightly be called armed robbery and extortion by the legal definitions of these acts in Nigeria. Their major targets were young men driving expensive cars and/or possessing expensive gadgets whom the SARS had often accused of being internet fraudsters without any evidence in many cases. Young ladies driving big cars or possessing expensive phones could be accused of being prostitutes and sexually assaulted. Such criminalization of this demographic was reflected in the #EndSARS protesters' placards which read "It's not a crime to be a talented youth;" "Being hardworking is not a crime;" "Stop criminalizing good life;" "iPhone is not a gun;" and more. Having accused the individuals of being criminals without any evidence, they would charge these individuals bailout fees. The individuals were most often taken to the nearest cash machines or banks to withdraw cash running into hundreds of thousands of Naira if they did not have up to that amount on them. Some who could not withdraw the demanded amounts were taken to the SARS detention center from where they would be forced to call their family members or others to arrange the illegal bailout fee. This act is no different from kidnapping for ransom done by criminal elements. Often, the victims were not allowed access to lawyers. Whilst some of these individuals know their rights, they were not interested in fighting for them for fear of upsetting the officers who usually threaten them with torture or brutal death at gunpoint.

The SARS team were very notorious for the extrajudicial killing of both criminal suspects and innocent citizens whose bodies were thrown into rivers or buried in shallow graves. In most cases, their loved ones were never informed of their fate or whereabouts. Nigerians developed the habit of visiting the SARS's detention center in search of any young men reported as missing as this notorious unit was known for not always allowing their arrestees to contact anyone. The SARS team, however, were not the only police officers committing these crimes. Acts of intimidation, extortion, brutality, threats, torture and extrajudicial killings characterize the Nigerian police forces in general. Nigerian police are notorious for unlawful arrest, detention and torture of innocent citizens on behalf of the former's relatives or friends, politicians, and wealthy individuals who contract the former to do so. SARS received special attention due to the unimaginable impunity with which they operated whilst bragging to their victims that they (SARS) were above the law. The criminal activities of the Nigerian police forces that have gone on for decades without adequate overhaul or reform

reflect the weak state of Nigeria whereby leaders seem more focused on the personal benefits of governance (e.g., power and wealth) as opposed to the welfare of their citizens.

The endemic police corruption in Nigeria means that members of the public do not trust the police (Agazue, 2015; Orole et al., 2015). Ayodele & Aderinto's (2014) study of crime reporting in Nigeria found that only a minority (47.8%) of crime victims reported to the police whilst the majority (52.2%) did not report. This is partly connected to police corruption. Such corruption breeds a lack of trust in the police who are fond of arresting and extorting crime victims as opposed to providing them with support. Ayodele and Aderinto (2014) found that some victims were afraid that the police might inform criminals who reported them (criminals) since some Nigerian police officers are known to sponsor or work together with criminals (Ayodele & Aderinto, 2014).

It takes only a little cash in the form of a bribe or other favors by wealthy and/or powerful suspects or those connected to them for the police to turn against a crime victim. It is important to state that such cases are not cases in which the victim's account or the evidence presented is questionable, rather the police deliberately ignore supposedly genuine accounts and/or evidence, including destroying the evidence after gathering it initially, in order to protect the suspect as opposed to the victim. Thus, poor victims of crimes who are aware of this trend may avoid reporting to the police. Police are known to advise victims of sexually-motivated crimes to withdraw their cases and when the victim does not, unlawful detention and even torture by the police may follow. A recent case of a female lawyer whose office was raided by the police who also attacked her, leaving her hospitalized for defiantly pursuing a rape case for a female client against the interests of the police, is detailed by Human Rights Watch (2020). This example is not exceptional but a reflection of what citizens often go through in the hands of the police whose actions sometimes are difficult to distinguish from touts. However, raiding offices to attack lawyers is not as common as the humiliation of victims at police stations.

In August 2020, a man in Benin, Edo state took to social media (Ebalsblog, 2020) to appeal to activists to help him secure justice for his six-year-old daughter who was raped by a young man from a wealthy family. Initially, police investigated the case swiftly, found evidence for the rape, and were on the trail of the perpetrator to arrest him. However, some days later, the family of the suspect visited the father of the victim and offered him two hundred thousand Naira as a bribe to withdraw the case from the police, which he refused. When the man and his wife visited the police officers who had already conducted an investigation on the matter, the team assaulted him, taunted him and his wife for pursuing a criminal case whilst poor, and threatened to arrest and detain the man. This type of behavior is not uncommon among the police after collecting a bribe from an offender or when the offender is connected to a person close to the police or whom the police want to protect.

Sexual harassment and rape of neighbors, employees or clients of powerful politicians, civil servants, businessmen, celebrities and pastors, are commonplace in Nigeria and it is very rare for the victims to get justice because police often work hard to protect these powerful individuals and to oppress their victims. Police corruption inadvertently encourages sexually-motivated crimes by the powerful. Laws are made to deter offenders and potential offenders firstly assess the chances of being caught and/or punished and will likely only engage in the act after underestimating the chances of punishment (Beccaria, 1963). Amucheazi (2019, p.277) identifies rape as

a “major problem in contemporary Nigeria” and suggests prosecution and punishment of the perpetrators as an effective means of curbing this crime. Unfortunately, police corruption in Nigeria means that potential offenders who believe that police can work in their favor are not deterred by the laws on rape and other sexual offenses as they are confident that they are very likely to get away without prosecution or punishment. Of all 155 rape incidents recorded by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in Anambra state, for example, only 12 were taken up by the police, and none was successfully prosecuted (Tade & Udechukwu, 2020). Although some states may achieve higher success in prosecution and conviction than others, Nigeria is not one of the countries where victims of sexual offenses achieve justice easily.

Police themselves commit sexual assaults and rape. These cases are numerous in the Nigerian press and have also generated demonstrations in recent times. The “bad apples” among the police regularly seize any available opportunities to rape vulnerable women. The current Coronavirus pandemic, for example, offered an opportunity for such officers to rape some of the women who came in contact with them even as people tried to avoid bodily contact with others for fear of infection. A 23-year-old widow was arrested in Saapekpenwaa, Rivers state by a police inspector in August 2020 for not wearing a face mask and was detained overnight by the inspector for the purpose of raping her. The inspector and one of his team members admitted the rape allegation when investigated but the woman later came under pressure by the police to withdraw the case (Sahara Reporters, 2020). Cases abound of young women being unlawfully arrested and detained by police officers for the purposes of raping them in revenge for ignoring their sexual advances or turning down their sexual demands.

Another factor promoting sexual offenses in Nigeria is the “culture of silence” with respect to unwanted sexual encounters. Victims of sexual assault are often blamed for their experiences, particularly those perpetrated by acquaintances (Gravelin et al., 2019; Kennedy & Prock, 2016). Such blaming may encourage the culture of silence as the victim may try to avoid a second unpleasant experience, that is, being blamed in addition to the sexual assault already experienced. By the victims keeping silent, the perpetrator is likely to evade justice and may continue with the act.

## METHODS

### Design

The qualitative research paradigm was adopted for this current article. The qualitative approach lays emphasis on meanings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Willig, 2013). Thus, it is indispensable when there is a need to understand the complexities of human behavior that requires answers to “why” and “how” questions (Lakshman et al., 2000). The phenomenon of investigation in this current article is relatively new and demands linguistic data capable of providing answers to questions relating to how the girls are sexually exploited and abused following their stigmatization as witches.

### Sampling and Data Collection

Primary data was adopted for this current research, which was collected via a semi-structured interview method. Primary data was chosen because the researcher needed first-hand accounts of the phenomenon from individuals who observed the events in order to meet his specific research purpose (Hox & Boeije, 2005; Salkind, 2010). A semi-structured interview was chosen to enable the researcher to phrase

questions in a way that would enable responses to tap into the particular topic area in which the researcher was interested (Longhurst, 2016), in this case, sexual exploitation and abuse connected to child witch stigmatization.

Purposive sampling was adopted in this current study. In purposive sampling, the researcher targets a certain network (Barratt et al., 2015) based on the purpose of the study and the researcher's belief that the members of that network have the "largest potential" for providing insights into the phenomenon of interest (Palys, 2008, p.698). Thus, a group of professionals believed by the researcher to possess adequate knowledge of the subject was sampled. Three senior staff members of the Child's Right and Rehabilitation Network (CRARN) were interviewed individually on a face-to-face basis. They were all men who were recruited based on their availability during the fieldwork.

CRARN is a non-governmental organization (NGO) in the Akwa Ibom state of Nigeria. The organization manages a shelter where children abandoned following witchcraft stigmatization are cared for. Some of the children in their shelter, however, are not abandoned children but those taken away from their parents or guardians following suspicion or upon receiving information that the safety of the children was in danger. In addition to providing accommodation to the children, the CRARN staff members also feed them, clothe them, and take care of them in other ways, such as offering psychological and medical supports if and when needed. They also reach out to the parents or guardians of the children to establish the reasons for the abuse. These aid workers frequently reach out to other children abandoned on the street as witches who could not be accommodated in their facilities or who absconded from the facilities for reasons discussed under the analysis section of this article. They meet with these children on a regular basis and discuss their situations. Due to this high level of involvement, the researcher presumed that these professionals possess adequate knowledge of these incidents and would have a lot of insights to offer on this subject. These insights are reflected in the interviews with them as can be seen in the data analysis section of this article.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher adhered to ethical guidelines set out by the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2014) in its Code of Human Research Ethics throughout the fieldwork and the drafting process. The interviews were recorded with a Dictaphone with the participants' permissions. The purpose of the research, the reasons for choosing the participants, and all other relevant information were provided to the participants before the interviews. Their consent was sought before their participation. It was made known to the participants that their names would not be revealed in the publications. Thus, their real names were replaced with coded names (Aid Worker 1). The participants mentioned the names of several victims of these crimes, but those names were similarly replaced with coded names (e.g., Child 1).

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed via thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a "method for identifying and analyzing patterns in qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2013, p.120). In a thematic analysis, the data are searched for co-occurring patterns of meaning or issues that are of interest to the researcher (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The current data were searched in the like manner after transcribing it from the Dictaphone. The researcher searched the data for patterns. Microsoft Word's "track changes" tool was used to code the patterns after identifying them. The researcher first searched for co-

occurring responses or meanings and then highlighted them and used the “comment” tool to give the highlighted passages names that broadly suggested the meanings in the data. These names appeared in the right margin of the document. He did this repeatedly and then merged the codes that appeared to refer to quotes with similar meanings.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The research data were analyzed under this subheading. Five principal themes were developed from the data to represent the findings and these are (1) vulnerable to statutory rape; (2) living with sexual addiction; (3) targeted for human trafficking; (4) vulnerable to infections and pregnancy; and (5) exposed to intergenerational abuse. Quotes from the interview responses were presented to evidence the issues in the analysis. The findings are discussed in light of existing literature in the field.

### **Vulnerable to Statutory Rape**

The research participants described incidents of sexual offenses against the stigmatized girls by members of the public as very common and occurring in different settings and contexts. Different terms including prostitution and rape were used by the participants to describe these incidents. The participants seemed to use these terms based on their assessments of the incidents. For example, rape was used in cases where they believed the girls were forcibly penetrated against their will while prostitution was used when they believed the girls consented because of material benefits expected in return. Some of the incidents may qualify as “survival sex” since the girls consented to their sexual exploiters when approached for sex. The term “survival sex” is understood as “the exchange of sex for material support” (Watson, 2011, p.639). However, survival sex may also be motivated by the need for physical protection, emotional stability and security, particularly in the case of homeless persons (Ibid.).

These girls experience sexually-related offenses in different forms – from defilement to harassment, sexual abuse and rape. However, penetration is very common and the aid workers believe that almost all the girls had been penetrated consensually or forcibly, not just once but very frequently. Thus, I have chosen the term “statutory rape” as a principal theme to represent these incidents. Although in many cases the girls consented in anticipation for rewards from their sexual exploiters, statutory rape still applies to these cases because the girls were below the age of sexual consent, which is 18 years in Nigeria based on the provisions of the CRA (2003). Although there could be other young women aged 18 and older among the victims, the victims are mostly minors. Even though those aged 18 and older are also labeled, these adults are not usually found on the street with minors. Thus, the participants provided interviews with minors in mind. For purposes of clarity, subthemes are used below to represent the settings, contexts and perpetrators of this statutory rape.

### **Raped by Members of the Public**

The girls are generally raped by members of the public who approach them on the streets where they live. Some of the perpetrators may take the girls to their houses, offices or other locations they consider safer or comfortable for them. The participants mostly use the term “prostitution” in this context because they view it from the

perspective that the girls agree to this due to the money or other gifts they often receive. The processes are described below:

Child witch is connected to prostitution. Most of the children are abused by men along the road by them looking for little cash from them to fend for themselves ... the children who are stigmatized as witches ... they don't have where to go. Then they go on having sexual affairs with members of the public in order for them to raise money. They always go into prostitution even at the age of seven and eight years upwards. ... (Aid Worker 1).

A second example comes from another aid worker who used his local government as a case in point:

In Eket local government here I belong to, prostitution has come to stay not because most girls want to join it but simply because they were vulnerable. They find themselves in situation they cannot control. It still boils back to stigmatization. Take for example, a female child is stigmatized and throw out of their house, she is vulnerable to all manner of hardships out there in the street and in the quest for fending for herself, she has no option than to join prostitution. ... So when these children are thrown out of the street, they will eat. ... They will eat and most men want to take advantage of them, like the female children, they give them peanuts, one thousand Naira to come and sleep with me and that's how prostitution begins (Aid Worker 2).

Case examples were provided by Aid Worker 1 of particular girls who were sexually exploited due to their presence on the streets as child witches:

The case of Child 1 was connected to prostitution. Child 1 who was a stigmatized child and was abandoned, who lived in children's center for many years and has grown up to become a big lady now. She had no parent, nobody to take care of her and no means of livelihood when she left the center at the age of sixteen. She had no way than to join prostitution in order to have food to eat for herself (Aid Worker 1).

Child 1 above had lived on the street for several years and became exposed to sexual activities too early as a child, which also served as her means of obtaining material support before she was rescued by the CRARN team who put her in their shelter. Unfortunately, she resorted back to survival sex on leaving the CRARN facility. Her reason for leaving the facility is not clear to the current researcher. However, as discussed under one of the themes below, sexual addiction forces some of the children to abscond from the facility and return to the street for the purpose of having sexual intercourse, which also serves as survival sex.

The case of Child 2 also. She was a child that was accused and abandoned as a witch. So she had no option when she grew up than to become a prostitute. She started sleeping with many people on the street. She had no home. She was sleeping in the filling station. So she started her prostitution that way. So, there was even a time a tanker driver, long-distance driver was sleeping at the Mobil Filling Station and she had sexual relationship with her but refused to pay her money. So, Child 2 seized his sixty thousand Naira and ran away. So, the issue was reported to child right NGO, then I was sent. I went there and met Child 2 and she explained that he had sex with her but he did not pay. He promised to pay two thousand Naira but he refused to pay and that's



why she seized the money. We discussed everything and I collected the money and handed over to the man (Aid Worker 1).

Another man also had sexual relationship with Child 2 also who promised to give her money, an applicant who was looking for job and later in the early morning and he failed to pay the money to her. Child 2 took all his documents, credentials and degree [certificate] and ran away and throw into the bush. We later searched for her and explained to her. Then she went to show us where she dumped the documents and we picked it and give it to the applicant (Aid Worker 1).

Sexual offences against girls and women are commonplace in Nigeria (Kunnuji & Esiet, 2015; Manyike et al., 2015; Odeyemi et al., 2016; Tade & Udechukwu, 2020; UNICEF, 2017) as previously discussed. The rape of these girls by members of the public, therefore, can be considered an extension of this existing problem in Nigeria. Whilst the girls discussed above are often raped on the street where they live or in the homes or workplaces of the men who demand sex from them, there is another group of stigmatized girls described by the participants as living on beaches due to the increasing presence of tourists and fishermen whom the girls believe have more money to offer. Thus, the girls are increasingly sexually exploited by the tourists and beach workers.

It happens in Ibaka Beach. It is a fishing community and there are many foreigners there ... they [fishermen] lure them [stigmatized children] because they have that power [money]. ... Then the community, let me say the population of the place, it is highly populated by Ghanaians followed by other tribes in Nigeria like that. It is a mixed community but there are many Ghanaians since the Ghanaians most of them are fishermen there and their economic power is somehow high (Aid Worker 1).

A similar account was also provided by another participant who observed that the areas with a disproportionate number of abandoned children have witnessed an increase in sexual exploitation at nearby transit locations:

I'm looking at the pattern of life, especially in Oron area and Ibaka area where we really have much of abandoned children. You know that the social life of so many girls at that Ibaka since it's a transit point, people that go to other central and all those areas to other countries. You know it's a fishing place, it's a kind of port which people do transport through boat to Cameroon, Gabon and other African countries. Most travelers will be coming from Lagos, some will be coming from other West African countries and when they come, they meet some of those girls (Aid Worker 3).

Although the witch label promotes sexual exploitation, it is not clear if all the girls and women targeted by men in these areas are stigmatized as witches. This will require further research investigation. Prostitution has been on the increase in Nigeria in modern times, partly caused by high levels of unemployment and poverty (Olofinbiyi et al., 2019). The breakdown of social norms and insurgency in some parts of the country also play their own parts. Thus, it is possible that other young women deliberately engage in prostitution in these transit locations due to the financial hardship in the country. The high level of lawlessness in the country also means that some

adults offer some girls under their care for sexual exploitation and these girls may also be mistaken for stigmatized girls.

The current data support existing reports on how tourism promotes sexual exploitation in different parts of the world. Andrews (2004) refers to a report by End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism (ECPAT), an international child advocacy organization based in Bangkok, to detail how the sexual exploitation of children in developing countries is significantly promoted by international tourism. Redlinger (2004) also reported similar patterns in the Americas and the Caribbean, where the trafficking of many women and children is tourism driven because of the high demand for sex by tourists and visitors. Harne and Radford (2008) raised an alarm on how children and young women, particularly those from poor and rural communities situated around traveling routes, face high levels of sexual exploitation. This current article supports these previous reports.

One of the unsettling questions raised by these incidents is how members of the public choose to engage in sexual activities with these girls despite the witch "label" assigned to them. The fact that these girls were banished to the street as witches means that people would be expected to avoid them. Considering the extant belief in these communities that child witches are deadly and can harm others (Agazue, 2015; 2020; Cookey, 2019). Whilst some visitors and tourists to the communities might be unaware of the witch status of these girls, members of the local community who are the ones that frequently rape the girls are likely to be aware that they have been banished as witches. It is not clear whether those sexually exploiting them believe that the girls truly are witches as accused, or that they trust that the girls' status as witches will not affect them in any way. This is an area that will benefit from future research.

The frequency of rape is another issue of concern picked up from the participants' accounts of the incidents. The experiences of statutory rape form part of the daily lives of the stigmatized girls as they are frequently raped by different men, both ones from the local community where they live and visitors to the community.

Most of these children are raped many times by members of the public as we saw during our findings. ... Some of them stay over a day without food. So these rapists will buy some food items like puff-puff (snack) or giving them a token, let me say hundred Naira or fifty Naira and they will have sex with them. ... So automatically, they rape these children. Sometimes, long-distance travelers like drivers who come to the town; who brought beans, rice, garri and other things who could not have access to go back ... they would rape them (Aid Worker 1).

A lot of them, roaming the street like that. ... A lot of them, most especially those young girls, some men motorists and other cyclists [commercial motorcyclists] who came in and give them little money and have sexual intercourse with them and that's one of those issues that we're really facing. ... (Aid Worker 3).

A participant referred to medical examinations conducted by CRARN to illustrate the seriousness of the rape:

During our medical examination at the CRARN Center, we took the children to hospitals for medical examination when we rescued them, it was discovered that most or almost all of the two hundred children at CRARN Center then lost their virginity to rapists (Aid Worker 1).

The frequency of these incidents can be understood in that these are children who could not provide for themselves, therefore, they respond to sexual advances in the hope of receiving food or cash as positive reinforcement. Although these girls typically live on the street where they experience these incidents, children's charities and governmental agencies do sometimes rescue them and place them in shelters. However, this is not always the case; children's charities are overwhelmed by the huge number of children appearing on the streets. Governmental agencies do not always live up to their responsibilities of taking children off the streets and this is reflected in the presence of hundreds of children on the streets of Akwa Ibom alone. The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC, n.d.) of Nigeria acknowledges that child abuse in Nigeria has continued with impunity and has been accepted as the norm by ethnic and traditional cultures, including religious inclinations. It adds that the "Nigerian child has been mostly ignored by the family, society and government" (NHRC, n.d.). There are organizations charged with children's rights in the country, such as the Social Welfare Department and others (see Oyeniya et al., 2009). There are programs designed by the government for street children that are meant to be executed by the Social Welfare Department but these programs are not adequately executed (Aransiola et al., 2009). These reviews were conducted more than a decade ago; unfortunately, more recent ones could not be found.

Nevertheless, the increasing presence of scores of children on the Nigerian streets is evidence that the situation has not improved. The NHRC (n.d.) attributes the failure of the Social Welfare Department in this respect to "massive corruption combined with legendary mismanagement of the resources" made available for these services, in addition to limited funds. Further, the NHRC (n.d.) observed that the Social Welfare Department's programs "were not attractive enough to the children" to the extent that the street children regard their facilities as a "Nigerian prison yard." Although children's charities and governmental agencies are unable to care for all the street children, it is to be acknowledged here that some of the children placed in shelters tend to abscond sometimes. This is evident from the case of Child 2 as described below. Child 2 was a native of Esit Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom state. After her parents died some years ago, she and her younger sister were banished from their community following an accusation that they were responsible for the death of their parents through witchcraft. Their street lives were described below:

They [Child 2 and her sister] lived many years with other street children along Marina Road, opposite Mobil Housing Estate in Eket. They chose to live there because of leftover food from the staff of ExxonMobil being dropped to them on that point. CRARN rescue team visited the area and rescued them with other children to the CRARN Center. She [Child 2] stayed at CRARN Center and later absconded with three other children and stay at the dilapidated section of Eket Sport Stadium. ... she was about fifteen years old. She has been exposing herself to sex with criminals in town and other street children who chose to stay at the stadium (Aid Worker 1).

The participant believed that Child 2 absconded from the CRARN facility back to the street due to sexual addiction following her early exposure to sexual activities and the frequency of such activities that lasted for several years before she was rescued by the CRARN staff. This will be discussed in depth under the theme of sexual addiction below.

### **Raped by Security Guards**

Unfortunately, these children not only are raped by members of the public who can be considered common criminals, but security men who are charged with protecting members of the public also perpetrate this crime. The security operatives involved in this crime are private security guards as described below:

They were also raped by security guards popularly called night watchmen who watch over markets, buildings, schools, homes and many facilities in town like that and sometime Mobil Filling Station ... They will see those children who are wandering, the stigmatized children of age sometimes seven or six like that, they would lure them with little items and they would rape them (Aid Worker 1).

It's quite unfortunate that security men at the market, shops, private premises ... [participant's voice became inaudible] rape the children, especially the girl ones. They have sexual intercourse with them. They set them up and give them little money and then have sex with them. That's what has been happening. Most of those children end up don't want to stay in the center; they just want to go around them to meet those security men and have sex with them (Aid Worker 3).

Aid Worker 3 described this situation as particularly problematic because the girls develop the habit of continually looking for these men to have sex with them even after being rescued, leading to some of them to abscond from the children's shelter. Although this participant also described the little money the girls receive from the security men and other people who exploit them as positive reinforcement, the amount is often not enough to motivate them to abscond from the secure shelter where they are taken care of to live on the street with the numerous consequences that come with that.

These children normally congregate around markets where they scavenge for food. The Udua Nka Market in Eket is a good example; dozens of these children live around the market according to Agazue's (2020) participants. In their search for food and cash, the children often live or congregate in certain busy places with heavy human traffic. Aid Worker 1, for example, described how Child 2 and her sister lived many years with other street children along Marina Road ... because leftover food was dropped to them by the staff of nearby ExxonMobil. It is the presence of these girls around these facilities that make them vulnerable to rape by the security guards who look after these facilities. Both private and public Nigerian security men are used to raping vulnerable girls and women. The rape incidents committed by security personnel at the IDP camps in Borno state have been previously discussed. The rape of these stigmatized girls stands as an extension of this problem in Nigeria.

### **Raped by Shelter Owners and Workers**

What appears to be the most worrying trend in the current data is one participant's account of how the stigmatized girls are also raped in the shelters where they are placed after being taken off the street. The aid worker observed that this had occurred in different shelters but specifically referred to one of them as his case point to illustrate the situation, including the swift action taken to punish one of the offenders and to achieve justice for his victim:

Our research also find out that some of these street children who are at care centers like orphanage are also being raped by some of the workers or owners of these centers. There's the case of children center in Esit Eket Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, which we normally call ... [name of the orphanage kept confidential by the current researcher for ethical reasons] whereby the owners of the orphanage were accused of raping the children and one child got impregnated and the case was reported to the police and the man was detained at the State Police Command and was charged to court. They did it for the best interest of the child to protect the child (Aid Worker 1).

The sexual abuse of these girls by the owners and managers of children's shelters indicates that even the shelters cannot guarantee these children's safety from sexual offenses. Again, this is a reflection of the high level of vulnerability of women and girls to sexual offenses in Nigeria. These current incidents support those previously discussed, such as the recurrent rape of orphans at the Light of Hope Orphanage in Akute (Punch, 2013), and the rape of female refugees in the camps for IDPs in northeastern Nigeria, amongst others.

The sexual offenses against girls and women by those in the position of trust in Nigeria can be attributed to men's expectations in a culture whereby males hold the belief that taking care of a female involves having carnal knowledge of her. This belief is deeply embedded in the psyche of the citizens and not much has been done to challenge it. Further, poor reporting of offences to the police in Nigeria (e.g., Ayodele and Aderinto, 2014), failure of the police to take swift action (Tade & Udechukwu, 2020) and the endemic police corruption in the country (Mudasiru & Fatai, 2020; Orole et al., 2015) collectively allow this problem to persist.

### Raped by Street Boys

The stigmatized girls are also raped by stigmatized boys who face the same fate as them do on the street. As previously noted, children of both sexes are labeled as witches and abused (Agazue, 2015; 2020; Cooney, 2019; Ekpenyong & Udisi, 2016). The boys who rape these girls are those who have also been abandoned to the street following witchcraft-related accusations.

They are also raped by other street children who are bigger since some of them live in clusters in uncompleted buildings or Eket Sports Stadium. Some of these children, they live in clusters sometimes, more than thirty girls with over twenty boys. ... So these bigger boys will rape these children also. So most of them usually live within the Stadium, the abandoned part of the Stadium. So some of these bigger boys ... in the night and will rape them, sometimes beat them the bigger girls [i.e., when they try to resist] (Aid Worker 1).

Although the account provided by Aid Worker 1 above suggests that this experience could be unpleasant to the girls as they try to resist being raped, an account by Aid Worker 3 below suggests that the opportunity for sexual activities on the street is the main reason the children prefer the street to the CRARN Center.

Some of the children are enjoying staying in the street. ... The boys will be joining the girls, the street children and they will be having sexual relationships on the street. So, that's why most of them don't enjoy to stay in the children's center [i.e., CRARN Center] (Aid Worker 3).

Both aid workers stated that some of the children abscond from CRARN Center even after being brought back repeatedly after absconding due to their ceaseless yearning for sexual activities. Aid workers considered this to be sexual addiction, which is discussed under a separate subheading below. It is understandable that even someone who enjoys sexual intercourse may not be in the mood for it sometimes or may be unwilling to do so with a certain person, which may partly explain the issue of resistance described by Aid Worker 1. Further, there is no reason to believe that all the girls have developed sexual addiction or frequent yearning for sex, or would desire rape even though survival sex forms part of their daily experiences.

Street children are generally exposed to sexual abuse (Chimdessa and Cheire, 2018; Mandalazi et al., 2013) both from within and outside their abodes. Chimdessa & Cheire's (2018) study of street children in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia found that the children engaged in different types of sexual activities from heterosexual to homosexual, including bisexual and group sex involving fellow children whom they lived with on the street and outsiders, too. Mandalazi et al.'s (2013, p.1) study of street children in the Malawian cities of Blantyre and Lilongwe found that sex was even used as "a tool to secure protection and to be accepted especially for the newcomers on the street." Ward and March (2006) refer to a 1996 survey of Burundian female refugees in a Tanzanian camp to demonstrate that 59 percent of the female refugees were raped by fellow (male) refugees in the same camp. The current study of street children in Nigeria supports these existing trends. Ward and March's (2006) study, however, was not focused on children.

### Living with Sexual Addiction

Sexual addiction, also known as compulsive sexual behavior, is a psychiatric disorder with "significant medical and psychiatric consequences" (Fong, 2006, p.51). Continued sexual activity regardless of the negative consequences resulting from it, is one of the major defining features of compulsive sexual behavior (Ibid.). The addict may regularly resort to addictive behaviors as a way of regulating emotions (Hughes, 2010). Efforts by the sexual addict to reduce the frequency of the sexual activity or stop it entirely often fail (Gold & Heffner, 1998). The behaviors of some of the stigmatized girls fit in with the above theories of sexual addiction, prompting the current researcher to develop a theme on sexual addiction. The participants believed that the repeated rapes experienced by the girls on the street from their early years (e.g., age 7), which may continue for several years, often cause them to develop a sexual addiction, making a normal life without frequent sexual activity difficult for them. The girls rescued from the street often make relentless efforts to return to the street due to their ceaseless yearning for sex. A reference to Child 2 by Aid Worker 1 is used to illustrate this problem below:

She started keeping some young boys as her sex slaves and she normally tortured those who refused to sex her by burning them with fire. She was in the street like that and normally had sex with other children and some men like that who give her money. So she was so much into that [sexual activities] and didn't want to stay at our center [i.e., CRARN facility] because she can't do that [have sex] here. She left the center and run back to those boys (Aid Worker 1).

This was collaborated by Aid Worker 3 who explained how it has remained a struggle for the aid workers to convince the children to stay at the CRARN facility as

the latter kept running back to the street due to the opportunity for sexual intercourse there, and not at the CRARN Center:

They will be running away and we make effort to bring them to children's center but they still go back to the street to have that freedom and liberty for sex. So, those are the things that always keep them there [i.e., on the street]. Even if you bring them back to children's center, they still find it difficult to stay. ... So it's a big issue for the people that are running the center to bring them in today and tomorrow they want to go out. They want to sleep with each other [i.e., sexual intercourse with street boys] in the street (Aid Worker 3).

These cases present sexual addiction as another consequence of the child witch stigmatization in Nigeria. The current researcher was told how dozens of men, both poor and rich, targeted Child 2 for sex as their best choice among the dozens of girls on the street because she was very pretty and attractive. Men preyed on her as soon as she was abandoned when she was about eight years old and this had gone on for about seven years by the time she was rescued by the CRARN team at age 15. Child 2's situation seemed complicated in the sense that her sexual activities had gone beyond "survival sex" that is usually meant for material support, protection and security (Watson, 2011) to demanding sex from her peers and even tormenting them if they refused. The girl's habit of absconding from the CRARN facility where she was fed and taken care of to the street where she could only survive through begging and sexual exploitation attests to the severity of her addiction. The girls living on the street also face serious security issues as they are sometimes beaten up by the boys during rape incidents as described by Aid Worker 1, yet this violence did not deter Child 2 from returning to the street even though she was already provided with security and protection. This further suggests the severity of her sexual addiction.

### Targeted for Human Trafficking

Human trafficking victims often find themselves working in the sex industry and/or labor market (Alvarez & Alessi, 2012). In line with this trend, the current data shows that the stigmatized girls are trafficked both locally and internationally for both sex and labor purposes. Whilst the girls generally engage in survival sex with people in their communities, some of them are engaged through sex trafficking by members of the community who present themselves to the girls as kind and supportive. A participant observed how such individuals promise the girls a good life but end up trafficking them for sexual exploitation purposes:

These children abandoned as witch or stigmatization also leads to child trafficking. Numerous child trafficking in Africa or in Akwa Ibom or in the locality I come from is because some people will see the children on the street, some women or some wealthy men intending to help these children will pick up these children, mostly the girl child and say I will send you to go and be with somebody as a housemaid, as a house help not knowing that this child is automatically being trafficked to join prostitution outside the state or anywhere. So because of stigmatization, some of the people will offer to help these children who will pick them out of the street only to sell them. ... They have no option. When they look back, what are they going to fall back on? No home for them, no place to go. So they have to join prostitution and to do whatever to see how their life can be better (Aid Worker 2).

Aid Worker 1 expanded the above account on trafficking, noting that the trafficking is not limited to sexual purposes but is also used for labor purposes within and outside Nigeria, including use in rituals and illegal adoptions by women who are unable to conceive their own children:

Witchcraft stigmatized children are also vulnerable to traffickers. During our research at border town called Ibaka in Mbo Local Government Area of Akwa Ibom State, traffickers visit the community constantly to pick abandoned stigmatized children. They will use them as sex slaves or send them to Cameroon to work in cocoa plantation. ... Some of them will work in Cameroon and other nearby countries. ... Traffickers sometimes sell them to ritualists and women who are barren who haven't got children. Some of them will come to the beach to pick those children. ... In our research, we found over thirty children at the Ibaka Beach within a month and after another visit to the area, none of them were found again. From the information we got, traffickers picked them. ... There [Ibaka], all type of women, many people normally come there and abandon children. Children who are stigmatized in villages are picked and dumped there at Ibaka (Aid Worker 1).

### **Vulnerability to Sexually Transmitted Infections and Pregnancy**

Sexually transmitted infections (STIs), HIV and pregnancy are known consequences of sexual intercourse. These effects become even more common in the cases of individuals engaging in sex indiscriminately such as sex workers (Olofinbiyi et al., 2019) and homeless children living on the street (Mandalazi et al., 2013). The girls discussed in this article are also vulnerable to these problems. The current participants described how the girls often contract STIs and HIV and sometimes become pregnant as a result of their exposure to sexual activities:

Many of the street children got pregnant while on the street also. Sometimes, after the rape, some of them would get pregnant and they would give birth to children in the street. ... (Aid Worker 1).

They [travelers] just impregnate them and travel which after sleeping with them for one or two days, they will leave, they will carry their pregnancy about. ... (Aid Worker 3).

Child 2 was very unfortunate to die on the street from AIDS after giving birth to a child and losing her child:

She got pregnant and delivered in that bush. Few months later the child died due to severe cold. ... She [Child 2] also died of AIDS later. She was tested positive of HIV. ... She had sexual intercourse with many boys in town without knowing her status. ... most of the children on the street might have been infected by her (Aid Worker 1).

The cases of two particular girls were also used by the above participant to illustrate the incidence of pregnancy and infections amongst these girls:

On the process of going out for prostitution to fend for food, Child 3 got pregnant and she had two children, two children on the street. So this is a typical effect of prostitution related to witchcraft accusation (Aid Worker 1).



Later, Child 4 contracted disease, HIV and she later died on the street having HIV. That's a typical example of what prostitution do to these children (Aid Worker 1).

It is not surprising that these girls contract such infections and sometimes become pregnant as well, considering their sexual activities and circumstances. Their age also makes their cases even more problematic. Unlike adults or educated persons who may understand the consequences of sexual activities, therefore, using barrier methods or other contraception, these are children, most of them too young to know anything about the consequences of sexual intercourse. Mandalazi et al. (2013, p.1) identified a number of factors contributing to the high risk of sexual practice, STIs and HIV in the Malawian street children they studied, including poor knowledge of the consequences of sexual practices. These factors can also be said to contribute to the problems faced by the girls discussed in this article. Even the grown-ups among them who may conceive of the idea of protection may not be firm enough to argue with or resist pressure from adults who may not like the idea of using a condom, for instance.

### Exposed to Intergenerational Abuse

The current data suggest that the sexual exploitation and different types of abuse suffered by the street girls do not end with them, rather they extend to another set of children – those born to the former. As discussed above, cases of pregnancy and child-birth abound and the fact that these girls are denounced as witches and rejected by families and communities, in addition to the labeling of children with unknown fathers as bastards, mean that their children similarly face lives of danger. Just as the stigmatized girls themselves become victims of trafficking, the children born to them may also become victims when they are abandoned as observed by Aid Worker 1. Sometimes, the street children also give birth to children who are then trafficked out of the state. The processes are described below:

So most of the women always like to sleep with them [fishermen and travelers] and in the process they become pregnant and most of these Ghanaians, most of them are married at home. So they will not like to carry the woman [impregnated girl] back to Ghana. So those children now ... they have nowhere to go, and nobody will claim the responsibility. We've seen such children here [CRARN Center] ... very little children. ... They abandon them. One aspect of it is they're Ghanaians [i.e., the children's fathers], so the people there [the girls' parents] are not ready to accept them and the mother does not want to take responsibility. So those children become bastards like that, start roaming around. So and in that concept, children who are always roaming around like that, not under the custody of somebody, they are automatically, everybody will just attribute them to be witches (Aid Worker 1).

Aid Worker 3 similarly described how this leads to a cycle of sexual exploitation and abuse. However, unlike the accounts provided by Aid Worker 1, Aid Worker 3 observed that some of the parents of the girls do not automatically reject the children, rather they may accept them initially and may reject them later for reasons provided below:

They [travelers] just impregnate them and travel. ... they will carry their pregnancy to stay with their parents in their house. The parents might tolerate them, probably when the mother or maybe their father died, their brother won't tolerate these children. ... Their brother will do one thing or the other

to make sure that the children are not living there. Even some mothers may say this your child, you should take him to the father and those kind of stuff. After constant struggling, the mother, at times the mother may not even stay there. ... none of the uncles will be interested in taking care of these children. ... The uncle will be saying this witch child will leave my house, go to your father's house. ... So situation like that, most of those children will be abandoned. So that pattern of life is also encouraging labeling. ... (Aid Worker 3).

The account above suggests that not all the stigmatized girls have entirely lost contact with their families. Some of the girls get in touch with their families from time to time, particularly after giving birth. Most of the girls were abandoned by their biological parents who are most often influenced by pastors or spiritualists around them who denounced those children as witches (Agazue, 2020). Some mothers still sympathize with their children and sometimes doubt the witch label assigned to them. The current researcher also found that some mothers do not believe that their children are witches as denounced, but end up abandoning them when community members threaten to banish the entire family, once the child has been denounced by the pastor or spiritualist who people believe hears from God. Such mothers are unlikely to kill their children but may abandon them for their own safety. CRARN staff members have successfully reunited many parents with children they had previously abandoned (Agazue, 2015). Thus, there are two categories of child witches – those whose families are sympathetic, and those who are banished completely and maybe killed if they try to reconnect with the family.


## CONCLUSION

This article has explored one of the new factors contributing to sexual exploitation and abuse in Nigeria. The article has offered new insights into how the stigmatization of children as witches in Nigeria has created a novel route to sexual victimization in the country. The ubiquitous presence of the stigmatized children on the streets makes them vulnerable to sexual predators. Whilst these girls are exploited and abused by adults, they also face the same fate at the hands of the boys they live with on the streets who are similarly abandoned as witches. Consequently, some of the girls contract STIs and HIV or become pregnant. Sadly, some have died during pregnancy or childbirth. For those who survive, their conditions may be worsened as homeless mothers. The fate of the children is also gloomy due to their mothers' status as witches. The children similarly face sexual exploitation and stigmatization, which may reduce their chances of success in life.


Generally stigmatization as a child witch comes with severe consequences for the children. This article therefore calls for urgent measures to save such children from their predicament. As previously noted, religion is the major factor promoting this social problem. While the belief that human beings could be witches is not necessarily religious as this belief is also held by many non-religious persons, religious organizations are instrumental in spreading the belief. Therefore this needs to be addressed. It will be very difficult to teach members of these religious organizations to stop believing that witches exist in contrary to what they have believed for so long, however, efforts can be made to convince them that witches, if they exist at all, are not necessarily visible in human form. Since they believe that witches wreak havoc spiritually, they should likewise confront or eliminate these threats spiritually, without attacking any person as a witch.

Regional conferences for religious leaders are recommended in the affected regions with the aim of fostering dialogues with the leaders of the particular religious organizations involved in this practice. These conferences can be arranged by children's charities in the affected states. Whilst it will be difficult to convince some pastors that witches do not exist, their attention can be diverted from the "thou shalt not suffer a witch to live" (Exodus, 22:18) injunction to the "love your neighbor" (Mark, 13:31) injunction. They should also be directed to those aspects of the Bible concerned with how Jesus loves children (e.g., Mark, 10:13-16). It should be stressed that it is a double standard for a pastor to claim to be representing Jesus but at the same time be promoting the abuse and murder of children loved dearly by Jesus.

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