

Online Child Sexual Abuse in the Gambia the Motivating Factors: Child Protection Officers' Perspective (Case Study: Serekunda Tourism Development Areas)

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Abstract

The digital technology has positively transformed the life and living conditions of many people around the globe. However, studies have revealed some negative socio-economic, political, cultural; and environmental impacts. This case study was conducted to interrogate online child sexual abuse and exploitation in The Gambia focusing on the motivating factors, techniques, negative impacts, victims and perpetrators support services available, preventive strategies; and institutional collaboration. According to the results the genesis of online child sexual abuse and exploitation in The Gambia are multifaceted and complex but can be summarized into: bad cultural beliefs and practices, drug abuse and peer pressure, lack of awareness, economic hardship, easy access to the internet, inadequate regulatory laws and policies, lack of enforcement of regulatory laws and policies, poor parenting methods, inadequate social services and political commitment, lack of access to quality and relevant education; and lack of prosecution of perpetrators.

Keywords

online; motivating factors
child; abuse; exploitation;
perpetrators; tourism



I. Introduction

Over the years, the world has witnessed a massive revolution in all aspects of life and society due to the unprecedented growth of the digital technology (Martin Hilbert, 2020). With the internet, communication has not only become fast but easy especially with the accessible and affordable mobile and smartphones, computer devices, social media; and messaging applications. Thus, it has resulted to more than 4.5 billion people being connected to the cyber world 1 in 3 of whom are children and unfortunately hardly under the supervision of any responsible adult (Bracket Foundation, n.d.). Although the virtual world has positively impacted all walks of life, it has a dark side that equally demands global recognition and immediate actions to save lives and businesses (Pietro Ferrara, 2021) and (Michael Chertoff, 2015).

With the remote world, the sexual abuse of children has not only been made easy, but has substantially increased as it has become a comfortable and affordable platform for perpetrators of child abuse and exploitation to establish relationship for subsequent offline meetings and engagement in sexual activities (Choi, Wong, & Fong, 2018). The online contacts have subsequently resulted in offenders physically meeting victims and sexually abused them, (Senker, Scott, & Wainwright, 2020).

Therefore, the cyber world is increasingly becoming a dangerous platform for children and teenagers particularly those whose profiles are often on the net (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). According to the National Centre for Missing and

Exploited children, from 2019 to 2020, it has witnessed a 106 per cent increment in reports of online sexual exploitation while the Watch Foundation registered 77 per cent increase in child self-generated sexual materials (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2021).

Globally, the picture looks disturbing as per the number of people who had experienced at least one online sexual abuse during childhood as per disaggregated data sub-regionally: Middle East and North Africa 44%, Western Europe 65%, Eastern Europe and Commonwealth Independent States 44%, East Asia 44%, Southeast Asia 52%, Australasia 52%, South Asia 50%, Southern Africa 57%, Central Africa 31%, Latin America 49%, Central America 59%; and North America 71% (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2019), (Maestral, 2021) and (WeProtect Global Alliance, 2021).

In light of these alarming online sexual abuse and exploitation meted on innocent children, academics, parents; and politicians has developed serious and heightened interest and commitment in ensuring that children are safe online since the digital technology has become an integral part of people's life and living (Rogers, Wczasek, & Davies, 2011). Therefore, building a safer virtual world especially for the vulnerable communities including the children has become a global agenda requiring both local and international pragmatic solutions (UNICEF Innocenti Research Centre, 2011).

In spite of this unbelievable maltreatment of our beloved children, the exact number of survivors and conditions is not scientifically well researched and documented; nevertheless what is concrete is they are in millions (Ali, Haykal, & Youssef, 2021). This lack of scholarly documentation, especially in the third world including The Gambia, beyond reasonable doubts is a huge challenge to all. Therefore, this research was meant to address this academic vacuum.

1.1 Aims and Methodology

AIMS

The primordial objective of this study was to interrogate the present scale and degree of the causes of online child sexual abuse in The Gambia focusing on the Tourism Development Areas (TDA) and surrounding communities, share knowledge to spark and inspire a process that will galvanise quick response from all in the battle against the menace. The Gambia is a major destination in Africa with hundreds of thousands of visitors round the year.

II. Research Methods

The qualitative approach was adopted to explore twenty nine child protection officers' views with regard to online child sexual abuse in The Gambia, mainly focusing on the causes, techniques of recruitment, the impacts, government and its development partners' efforts toward its eradication, strategies to eliminate it; challenges; and opportunities. This approach was adopted in response to the need to generate rich and original descriptions of the respondents' views and professionals experiences in anticipation that one can discern what is exactly happening in the tourism development areas vis-à-vis online child sexual abuse and what can be done to eradicate it. The study was informed by a case study and twenty nine (29) child protection officers who are directly involved in handling matters associated with child abuse in the country were in-depth interviewed. The study lasted for six months and thematically covered the

motivating factors, techniques, impacts, support services, preventive strategies; and institutional collaboration.

III. Results and Discussion

4.1 Online Child Sexual Abuse Motivating Factors

Although vast majority of the informants affirmed that online child sexual abuse and exploitation is happening in The Gambia including the tourism development areas (TDA), in general terms, they appeared to hold varying perspectives in discussing the fundamental causes which can be thematically catalogued into: bad cultural beliefs and practices, drug abuse and peer pressure, lack of awareness, economic hardship, easy access to the internet, inadequate regulatory laws and policies, lack of enforcement of regulatory laws and policies, poor parenting methods, inadequate social services and political commitment, lack of access to quality and relevant education; and lack of prosecution of perpetrators as depicted in the table underneath.

4.2 Genesises of Online Child Abuse and Commercial Exploitation

Identified genesises	Frequency	%
Bad cultural beliefs and practices	14	7.0
Drug abuse and peer pressure	11	5.4
Lack of awareness	14	7.0
Economic hardships	19	9.3
Easy access to the internet	31	15.2
Inadequate regulatory laws and policies	12	6.0
Lack of enforcement of regulatory laws and policies	21	10.2
Poor parenting methods	26	13.0
Inadequate social services and political commitment	17	8.3
Lack of access to quality and relevant education	15	7.4
Lack of prosecution of perpetrators	24	12.0
Total response	204	100.00

In The Gambia, like most third world countries, poverty is most of the time if not all of the times cited as the main cause of the existing socio-economic and political hardships in the country including child sex tourism as lamented by some informants: “.....because of poverty children are into the sex industry both online and offline to support families.....and even selling in the streets and on the beaches exposing them to abuse including sexual abuse,” asserted a male informant. This aligns with (Davy Deanna, 2017) findings, in addition to weak child protection mechanisms and insufficient law enforcement, poverty has left many children vulnerable to all forms of abuse because their choices, opportunities, means of survival, etc. are severely compromised compelling them to enter the sex industry to support themselves and sometimes their families.

Similarly, some key informants felt that the culture of silence has aided and abetted the continuous commercial exploitation and sexual abuse of children in spite of all the awareness raising conducted over the years: “.....the culture of silence as a result of wanting to maintain family prestige has not only resulted to low reporting rate but also increase in child abuse in the communities,” emphasised a male informant. Similarly, another female informant claimed; “.....the culture of silence as a result of wanting to maintain family prestige has not only resulted to low reporting rate but also increase in

child abuse in the communities.....so too is the child bartering culture and child marriage....” These testimonies concur with (Al Khatib, 2022), the fundamental rationale for not reporting child sexual abuse in the community include socio-cultural factors, fear from the parents’ reactions, lack of proper understanding of the reporting and referral procedures and lack of awareness of the possible negative consequences on the wellbeing of the child and the family. Child marriage which is widely practice in many communities including Indonesia has resulted to young girls entering into the sex trade especially when they are divorced or deserted with young children to provide for, (Davy Deanna, 2017).

Equally, (Ali et al., 2021) revealed that the causes of child sexual abuse can be broadly classified into social, psychological and economical, and worse of all, vulnerability is catapulted with low socioeconomic standing, absence of biological parents, substance abuse by parents, child marriage; and the normalization of child sexual abuse as part of cultural practices and highly held by some communities as something critical for both victims and perpetrators.

In the same token, drugs and alcohol abuse has been seriously faulted by some key informants for the continuous abuse of children in the tourism industry. “.....it is very important but they will look at the linkages of early marriage and drug abuse, because if you force somebody to get marry at that tender age this has stigma she can go and use drugs. People that using drugs can relief stress.” This aligns well with (Tonmyr & Shields, 2017) findings that the huge consumption of illegal substance, alcohol, marijuana; and off label drugs has resulted in many young women and children to be easily lure into the sex industry. Similarly, informants have consistently lamented on lack of awareness of child sexual abuse and its associated consequences as principal factor for children being abused especially at home and in the tourism development area regardless of whether offline or online as asserted by a female informant. “.....in my candid opinion I will say its ignorance because something can happen, the child can be sexually abuse but the child does not know that he or she has been sexually abuse, even the communities might see their children going through sexual abuse but the community may not realize that is actually a child sexual abuse.” This is in agreement with (Bracket Foundation, n.d.), the lack of awareness of the danger of the digital world by parents, caregivers, policy and law makers; and the internet and technology companies has significantly exposed the children to online sexual abuse.

According to some informants poverty is a key genesis of the menace as put: “.....most of our children are being abused because the tourists take advantage of their poverty by giving them money to satisfy themselves, actually to lure them into the sex industry at that tender anger.....,” lamented a female informant. This, corroborates the findings of (Çetin & Özözen Danacı, 2016), the amount of disposal income in the hand of the family is a significant contributor to the children’s immunity to abuse. In addition to the main drivers namely; structural, institutional, community, interpersonal; and individual factors, the following factors have significantly contributed to the vulnerability of children to online sexual abuse: social isolation, parental conflict, history of abuse, depression, bullying, poverty, urbanization; and family disintegration, (UNICEF, 2020),

In parallel, some informants blamed children’s unrestricted access to the internet for the increase in online child abuse: “..... monitoring and limiting children access to internet especially when they don’t need it for their school work will safe all because with this easy access all children are vulnerable as they all want be in facebook and other social medias where all kind of people are. That is how online abuse start.” This assertion dovetail with (Bracket Foundation, n.d.), the quick and everywhere and at any time access to the internet through the smartphone, has not only facilitated children easy access to child

sexual materials but has equally made it easy to groom them for subsequent abuse by different paedophiles. Similarly, (Choi et al., 2018) found that children with smartphones are more at risk of abuse because they have easy access to different dating applications and to avert this risk, they need to be empowered to assess the degree of risk, be able to stratified them and as well be enrolled in some preventive programs.

Correspondingly, (Maestral, 2021), most children confirmed that they are vulnerable to online sexual abuse due to widespread access to the internet through the cyber cafes, computers and laptops at home, smartphones, peers webcams, YouTube, Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, Snapchat and TikTok, Omegle, Likee, Phoenix, Twitter, Telegram, Opera Mini IMO, online games; and popular online platforms. The most disturbing aspects of the internet as avenue for the sexual abuse of children is, the perpetrators using it to validate their horrendous activities(Ali et al., 2021). Although the digital world has revolutionized the entire life of all, it has equally resulted in the unprecedented increase in the online child sexual abuse, (Bracket Foundation, n.d.).

In most third world countries including The Gambia, inadequate regulatory laws and policies has significantly being associated with the vulnerability of children to all kind of abuses more especially in the tourism and travel industry as elaborated by some of the informants: “.....but we also have loopholes like when you look at the Children Act 2005, in comparison to other Acts and Laws we have in this country there are lots of inconsistenciesthe issue of online sexual exploitation of children, unfortunately the Children Act 2005 does not have any provision that clearly states that it is an offence.” Similarly, another informant highlighted the issue of lack of legislation enforcement: “..... we realized that there are laws that are banning child marriage to translate the laws into action is our biggest challenges but you have a very good piece of legislature but putting that into action is what is giving us big time problem to bring those abusers before the law,” claimed an informant. These corroborate (Stanley, 2001) findings, these days for online abusers to sexually abuse children they bank on legal loopholes and legislative variations as most of the pornographic materials on the internet are produced and distributed in countries where the activity is yet to be criminalized such as Japan for example, reported the Interpol. Because the conventional legislative frameworks and law enforcement are poor in relation to cyber-crimes and other serious crimes committed in the internet, most communities including the children are victims of different abuses and exploitation, (Foundation, 2016).

For children to remain safe, the parents have a huge stake, and to fulfil that obligations good and responsible parenting must be core as without it children will be rendered vulnerable at all time and everywhere. “.....with lack of care and good parenting, children being exposed to the virtual world they have no idea about and abusers like most to reach children, parenting method is critical,” asserted informants. This concurs with(Rogers et al., 2011), parents who have shown lot of interest in their children activities in the internet are able to save their children from cyber abuse compare to those who don’t show much concern about their children’s internet engagements. Child sexual abuse online and offline has been associated with adverse childhood experiences, poor parenting, family violence, substance abuse, socio-economic constraints, viewing pornographic materials, rigid gender values, patriarchy, colonialism, unresolved grief; and resultant transgenerational trauma (Cant, Harries, & Chamarette, 2022).

In the same vein, informants expressed inadequate social services and political commitment to be some of the causative factors of the abuse of children both online and offline as put by some of them. “.....yes they are committed in terms of amending the Act abolishing child marriage but how long have they gone to really institutionalized this?

How many police stations have functional childcare unit? How many communities has child protection committees that are really engaging the communities?our president just give state of nation address; did he talk about child and the fact that anybody found abusing a child for this and for that you will be punish by the law and the law is very clearbecause it has political implications, so they want to avoid it, the political will is lacking” asserted a female informant. This is supported by the findings of (Cant et al., 2022), the inadequate social services to address some psycho-social needs especially for those who have experienced trauma sometimes related to child sexual abuse and other types of violence are critical factors in the causations of child sexual abuse and exploitation. To end the sexual abuse and commercial exploitation of children sooner than later, governments the principal duty bearers lack of political commitment must end with immediate effect as demonstrated in some governments reducing girls and women to commercial commodities by offering women hostesses to influential visitors, not adequately regulating some industries including the travel and tourism industries; and worse of all, banking on the sex trade to fund programmes (Zafft, 2010). Similarly, (Fredette, 2009) revealed, the existence of discriminatory national policies and structures, lack of interest in child protection issues, rampant corruption in law enforcement authorities, regarding child sex tourism as non-serious problems, giving license to perpetrators to continue their engagements, officials believing that prostitution is a must for economic success; and providing sex to foreign military forces are clear testimonies of governments lack of political will to end the abuse of children.

Children access to education is not only a fundamental human for some communities but a mean of keeping them secured and prepared for the future challenges later in adulthood as lamented by some informants: “..... without access to affordable education, the future of the children is not only bad but they cannot be removed from the beaches and other places visited by tourists.....and small brothels found in the remote corners of the TDA.....we see it especially when on patrol.....”, asserted a male informant. This dovetails with (Kotrla & Wommack, 2011) while the provision of professional rescue, recovery, rehabilitation and reintegration services at accessible and affordable cost for survivors of child abuse and exploitation is a must, the access to quality and relevant education for all children at all ages is indispensable in tackling the menace in all strata. Similarly, to deter criminal activities including child abuse perpetrators must be tried and punish expeditiously as without such crimes will not be only on the increase but with time it will be normalized putting the life of most children in jeopardy. “.....the tourism development area we have this special court that was created to prosecute sexual offenses.....and you realize that since its establishment in 2010 to date we cannot talk about any successful prosecutionall because of lack of commitment,” lamented a male informant. This corroborates (Cant et al., 2022), child sexual abuse and exploitation can’t be completely divorced from the lack of prosecution, jailing, registration, sharing of details of convicted perpetrators, residential restriction, lack of community based rehabilitation for juvenile; and centralized treatment services. Similarly, (Angela, 2016), concluded when perpetrators are not investigated and prosecuted, communities will have no ground to believe that the government and partners are genuine in the protection of their children and above all with such impunity reigning, there is no way that child sexual abuse and exploitation and other deadly crimes will not be on the increase.

IV. Summary and conclusion

Economic hardship, that is mostly castigated, is no longer the fundamental justification for children being in the sex industry as informants has identified a verity of complex additional motivating factors which can be summarized into: bad cultural beliefs and practices, drug abuse and peer pressure, lack of awareness, economic hardship, easy access to the internet, inadequate regulatory laws and policies, lack of enforcement of regulatory laws and policies, poor parenting methods, inadequate social services and political commitment, lack of access to quality and relevant education; and lack of prosecution of perpetrators.

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