



ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Forms and Determinants of Sexual Abuse among Female Child Hawkers in Uyo, Nigeria

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Keywords

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ABSTRACT

Background: Female hawkers are exposed to numerous hazards including sexual abuse. This study aimed at assessing the prevalence, forms and determinants of sexual abuse among female child hawkers in Uyo, Nigeria.

Methods: This was a cross-sectional descriptive study carried out among female child hawkers in Uyo, Nigeria. Data was collected using an interviewer-administered structured questionnaire and was analyzed with IBM SPSS Statistics 20.0 software. Level of significance was set at 0.05.

Result: A total of 172 respondents participated in the study. The mean age was 12.9±2.3 years. School dropout rate was 11.6% among respondents. Commonest reasons for hawking included family support (66.8%), feeding (22.1%) and generating school fees (11.1%). Prevalence of any form of sexual abuse was 76.2%. Forms of sexual abuse reported included verbal abuse (54.1%), inappropriate touching (56.4%), kissing (14.5%), intercourse due to enticement (18.0%) and rape (12.2%). The commonest reason for sexual act among those enticed was monetary gains, (64.5%). Consequences of sexual abuse included STI (13.5%), pregnancy (5.8%) and abortion (5.8%) respectively. Predictors of any form of sexual abuse included being aged 14-17 years (OR =14.70, 95%CI=2.05-105.14, p=0.007), being a dropout (OR=7.37, 95%CI=2.21-24.59, p=0.001) and being from social class V (OR=23.44, 95%CI=1.13-401.67, p=0.031).

Conclusion: There was high prevalence of sexual abuse ranging from inappropriate touching to rape. Predictors of sexual abuse included age, being a dropout and of low socio economic class. Enlightenment campaigns on risks of female child hawking, establishment of skill acquisition centres and free education to secondary level are advocated.

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INTRODUCTION

Street hawking is a common sight in Nigeria and in other developing countries.¹ A hawker is someone who moves from place to place to showcase goods for possible

purchase by passers-by without having a permanent built up structure.² The risks and health problems involved in street hawking far outweighs the gains. Many of the hawkers are exposed to different health

problems such as road traffic accidents, headache, general body pains, fever and weakness.³ Hawking for many hours daily on the streets also exposes hawkers, especially the females to sexual abuse,⁴ with the attendant morbidity and sometimes mortality.⁵ Sexual abuse has been described as the act of enticing or forcing a person to take part in sexual activities such as touching breasts, buttocks or genital fondling, kissing, cunnilingus and penetration of the vagina or anus with sexual organs or objects.^{6, 7} Sexual abuse also includes use of words suggestive of intention to indulge in any form of sexual practice or activity.¹ These abuses occur both to the adult and child hawkers. The Nigerian child labour act defines a child as one who is below the age of 18 years.⁸ Many hawkers fall within this age group and encounter different forms of sexual abuses while selling their wares.

Several factors have been identified as contributing to children engaging in street hawking, one of which is poverty.⁹ Parents who may be unable to meet the financial demands of their families possibly due to large family size and unemployment may resort to sending their children to hawk in order to generate extra income for basic family needs.⁹⁻¹¹ Parental death or separation may also lead to lack of finance which could force the juvenile female hawkers to spend long hours on the streets in an attempt to generate income for survival.^{4, 10} This contributes to the vulnerability of the child hawkers as some are offered money, shelter, food, school

sponsorship, drugs or gifts for sex, items which they otherwise may not have been able to afford.^{4, 9-12} Female adolescents who experienced basic deprivation such as going without food sometimes, were reported by a previous study to have higher likelihood of sexual abuse.¹³ Studies have shown that many young females end up going beyond hawking to engaging in risky sexual practices such as having multiple sexual partners, with low or no use of condom and prostitution with all the attendant negative consequences in order to earn extra money.^{14, 15}

Ignorance of the female child hawkers about the possible consequences of sexual intercourse increases their vulnerability and risk taking behaviour. A study in Anambra State, Nigeria reported low level of awareness of risks of pregnancy (43.1%) and sexually transmitted infections (STI) (54.3%) as consequences of intercourse among young female hawkers.¹ Nearly half (47.5%) of the female hawkers in another study reported pregnancy or STI in the course of hawking.⁴ Fear of being stigmatized may also make these female hawkers not to seek appropriate help or disclose to their parents or guardians.¹⁰ This may lead to attempted abortion among those pregnant with all the attendant risks. Those who choose to carry the pregnancy to term may encounter several life threatening health consequences due to their age in addition to dropping out of school.

Another factor contributing to sexual abuse among female street hawkers is dropping

out of school due to poor academic performance or inability to pay fees.⁹ Such adolescents are encouraged to learn different trades, one of which may be street hawking which makes them more vulnerable due to easy availability on the streets. Also, another contributory factor fuelling sexual abuse in certain parts of Nigeria as reported in a study is the finding of potential suitors by the female hawkers and income generation for their marriages.¹⁶ Such practices are likely to encourage illicit sexual practices by the female child hawkers to attract male attention and financial gains.

Nigeria adopted the Child Rights Act in 2003 which was meant to serve as a legal documentation for the protection of children rights in Nigeria. The rights listed include the rights to dignity (section 11), protection against sexual abuses (section 29) and protection against buying, selling, begging and prostitution (section 38).¹⁷ These laws are yet to be implemented in the different states in Nigeria. Consequently, several studies have documented high occurrences of sexual abuse among female children ranging from 31.5% - 81.5%. This spanned from inappropriate touching to penetrative sex, attempted rape and actual rape.^{1, 4, 11, 12} A total of 40 cases of sexual abuse of girls were documented within 6 months in a general hospital in Suleja,¹⁸ while 20 cases were documented in a health centre in Zaria, out of which 17 were females of which 3 were hawkers.¹⁹ More female hawkers have been reported to be victims of sexual abuse compared to

males.^{5, 20} A previous study in Uyo, Nigeria among child hawkers reported that almost a third of the females had ever been sexually harassed or raped compared to less than a tenth of the males.³ The prevalence and types of abuse were however not specified. The present study therefore aimed at assessing the prevalence, types and determinants of sexual abuse among female child hawkers in Uyo, Nigeria.

METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in February 2019 in Uyo, the capital of Akwa Ibom State in the South-South region of Nigeria with a total population of 305,961 in 2006 and a projected population of 429,900 as at 2016.²¹ Uyo is the administrative and commercial hub of a major oil-producing state in Nigeria. It is a cosmopolitan city with people from diverse culture, ethnicity, religion and social class. The inhabitants of Uyo are commonly civil servants, artisans and traders with majority of the populace working in the informal sector. Street trading is a common sight in most street junctions in the city. The common language spoken is Ibibio.

This was a cross-sectional descriptive study carried out on female street hawkers aged below 18 years. The sample size was calculated using the formula for estimating single proportion²² with a prevalence (p) of 11.3% being the prevalence of forced sexual intercourse among juvenile female hawkers in a previous study in Western Nigeria,¹⁰ z of 1.96, an acceptable margin of error of 0.05 and 10% overestimation to

accommodate for non-response. This gave a sample size of 170. A total of 172 respondents however participated in the study. A preliminary survey was carried out in Uyo town to identify locations with clusters of street hawkers. Such locations included road junctions, the University of Uyo campus and environs and the major motor parks. A total population of all consenting female hawkers who met the inclusion criteria was carried out in the above listed locations until the desired sample size was attained.

A pretested, interviewer-administered, structured questionnaire was used to collect information on the socio-demographic characteristics, work history and sexual abuse history of the respondents. The questionnaire was pretested among female hawkers at a road junction in Abak, a town 20 km from Uyo and adjustments were made to the questionnaire accordingly. The instrument was administered by three newly qualified medical doctors who served as research assistants and were recruited to participate in data collection. The assistants went through a training session on how to administer the questionnaire in English and in the local dialect. The respondents were interviewed in English or the local dialect depending on their preferences. Data was collected at 8-11am, 2-4pm and 5-8pm to capture those who hawked at those periods. In order to avoid duplication, during each session of interview, the hawkers were first asked if they were previously interviewed. Those

that affirmed were excluded from subsequent interviews. Each location was visited till there were no new respondents. Data collection lasted for seven days.

Using the modified Oyedeji classification of social class in Opara and Johnson 2019,²³ the respondents were categorized into social classes based on the occupation and educational qualifications of the household heads. Grading was on a score of 1 to 5, with 1 as the highest and 5 as the lowest social class. For occupation, class 1 comprised of senior public servants, professionals, managers, large scale traders, business men; class 2 of intermediate grade public servants and school teachers; class 3 of drivers and artisans; class 4 comprised of petty traders, labourers, and messengers while class 5 was for the unemployed, full time housewives and subsistence farmers. For educational scale, class 1 was awarded to university graduates or equivalent, class 2 to school certificate holders (ordinary level GCE) who also had teacher or other professional training; class 3 to school certificate or grade II teachers' certificate holders or equivalent; class 4 to those who had modern three and primary 6 certificates and 5 to those who had no formal education. The mean of the two scores to the nearest whole number was the socioeconomic class assigned to each respondent.

The data collected was entered into a computer and analyzed using the IBM SPSS software version 20.0. Data analysis was

done using descriptive statistics (frequencies and proportions) and inferential statistics (chi square to test the significance of association between two categorical variables). Logistic regression was also employed to carry out predictive analysis of selected variables. The statistical significance level was set at $p < 0.05$. Ethical approval for the study with reference number MH/PRS/99/VOL.V/562 was obtained from the Ethics Committee of the State Ministry of Health, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. In addition, the purpose of the study was explained to prospective respondents, the confidentiality of the information they would provide assured and they were not required to supply their names. Informed verbal assent was obtained from all respondents and they were informed of their freedom to opt out of the study if they desired.

RESULTS

A total of 172 respondents participated in the study. The mean age was 12.9 ± 2.3 years. The highest proportion of respondents, 83 (48.3%) were 10-13 years old and 84 (48.8%) were currently in secondary school, while 20 (11.6%) had dropped out. Eighty (46.5%) were sponsored in school by parents and 90 (52.3%) were living with the parents. Less than half 81 (47.1%) had both parents alive, while both parents were dead for 23 (13.4%) of the respondents. No respondent had parents belonging to socioeconomic class I. The commonest was social class IV 86 (50.0%).

(Table 1) A greater number, 101 (58.7%) had a family size of 4-7 people.

Table 1: Socio-demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Socio-demographic characteristics	Frequency (n=172)	Percent
Age group (years)		
<10	19	11.0
10-13	83	48.3
14-17	70	40.7
Mean (SD) = 12.9 (2.3)		
Level of education		
Currently in primary	68	39.5
Currently in secondary	84	48.8
Drop out	20	11.6
Sponsorship		
Parents	80	46.5
Relatives	65	37.8
Non-relatives guardian	27	15.7
Currently living with		
Parents	90	52.3
Relative	59	34.3
Others	23	13.4
Parents alive or dead		
Both alive	81	47.1
Only one parent alive	68	39.5
Both dead	23	13.4
Socio economic class		
Class 2	6	3.5
Class 3	50	29.1
Class 4	86	50.0
Class 5	30	17.4

The highest proportion of the respondents, 82 (47.7%) were sent to hawk by their parents and the commonest reasons were family support 115 (66.8%) and feeding 38 (22.1%). More than two-thirds of them, 119 (69.2%) had been hawking for 1-4 years with 80 (46.5%) hawking for more than 5 days weekly. Majority of the respondents, 156 (90.7%) hawked in the evening while 69 (40.1%) hawked the whole day.

Table 2: Factors related to hawking among Respondents

Variable	Frequency (n=172)	Percent
Respondent sent to hawk by		
Self	20	11.6
Parents	82	47.7
Relatives/Guardian	70	40.7
Commonest reason for hawking		
Family support	115	66.8
Feeding	38	22.1
School fees	19	11.1
Years of hawking		
Less than 1 year	39	22.7
1-4 years	119	69.2
Above 4 years	14	8.1
Weekly hawking days		
Less than 3	14	8.1
3-5	78	45.4
More than 5	80	46.5
Time of the day for hawking*		
Morning	89	51.7
Afternoon	123	71.5
Evening	156	90.7
All the time	69	40.1
Average daily income (₦)		
Less than 2000	69	40.1
2000-5000	86	50.0
Above 5000	17	9.9
Commonest way income is spent		
Given to parent/guardian	157	91.3
Kept for self-use	10	5.8
Both	5	2.9

*Multiple response

Half (50.0%) reported earning ₦2,000-₦5,000 daily. Majority, 157 (91.3%) gave their earnings to their parents or guardian. (Table 2) The proportion of respondents who reported any form of sexual abuse was 131 (76.2%). Types of sexual abuse ever experienced included verbal abuse 93 (54.1%), inappropriate touching 97 (56.4%), kissing 25 (14.5%), intercourse due to

enticement 31 (18.0%) and rape 21 (12.2%). (Table 3) Among the child hawkers who were sexually exposed either through rape or enticement, 7 (13.5%) ever had STI while 3 (5.8%) had past history of pregnancy and abortion respectively. Only 16 (30.8%) of the perpetrators used condom. (Table 4) The commonest reason for sexual act among those enticed was monetary gains, (64.5%), shelter 5 (16.1%), food 4 (12.9%) and selling of hawked items 2 (6.5%).

Table 3: Sexual abuse ever experienced by Hawkers

Variable	Frequency (n=172)	Percent
Any form of sexual abuse		
Yes	131	76.2
No	41	23.8
Inappropriate touch		
Yes		
No	97	56.4
	75	43.6
Verbal sexual abuse		
Yes	93	54.1
No	79	45.9
Kissed while hawking		
Yes	25	14.5
No	147	85.5
Enticed into intercourse		
Yes	31	18.0
No	141	82.0
Raped		
Yes	21	12.2
No	151	87.8

There were statistically significant associations between age, educational status, working for >4 years, social class and experiencing a form of sexual abuse. Majority, 68 (97.1%) of those aged 14-17 experienced sexual abuse (p< 0.001). Also,

a high proportion of those in secondary school 79 (94.0%) and dropouts 18 (90.0%) reported a form of sexual abuse ($p < 0.001$). Among those who had worked for >4 years, 13 (92.9%) had suffered sexual abuse ($p = 0.028$). The proportion of hawkers experiencing sexual abuse progressively increased as the parents' social class decreased, being highest among those in social class V 28 (93.3%) ($p = 0.041$). (Table 5) Predictors of any form of sexual abuse among the hawkers included being aged 10-13 years (OR=2.67, 95%CI=1.72-14.0, $p = 0.009$), being aged 14-17 years (OR=14.70, 95%CI=2.05-105.14, $p = 0.007$), being a dropout (OR=7.37, 95%CI=2.21-24.59, $p = 0.001$) and being from social class V (OR=23.44, 95%CI=1.13-401.67, $p = 0.031$). (Table 6)

Table 4: Consequences and factors related to sexual activities among respondents

Variables	Frequency (n=52)*	Percent
History of STI		
Yes	7	13.5
No	45	86.5
Unwanted pregnancy		
Yes	3	5.8
No	49	94.2
Abortion		
Yes	3	5.8
No	49	94.2
Protective measure adopted during intercourse		
Condom	16	30.8
None	36	69.2

*Those who have been enticed into intercourse or raped

DISCUSSION

Street hawking, especially among the underage females is increasingly becoming

of public health concern due to numerous social and health implications of those engaging in it.^{9, 24} This study assessed the prevalence, types and determinants of sexual abuse among female hawkers in Uyo, Nigeria. The mean age of the respondents was 12.9 ± 2.3 years. This is in agreement with previous studies.^{5, 25} Children are commonly engaged in street hawking in developing countries as they are regarded as cheap labour who do not have to be paid to work.²⁶ These are underage individuals who are not old enough to make informed decisions and withstand societal pressures. Engaging them in activities with no adult supervision therefore makes them very vulnerable and naïve and easily taken advantage of by adults.

This study revealed that more than three quarters of respondents had experienced a form of sexual abuse in the course of hawking. This early exposure to sexual activities is capable of steering the child hawkers in the wrong direction with possible permanent negative consequences.

In the present study, hawkers aged 14-17 years were about 15 times more likely to experience a form of sexual abuse compared to those aged 8-10 years. This may probably be because females in that age group often look appealing due to the physical development of their bodies as they attain puberty. Victims of sexual abuse may also experience various forms of psychological consequences including depression, low self-esteem, anxiety disorders and self-hate.

Table 5: Factors associated with any form of sexual abuse among hawkers

Factors	Any form of abuse		Total (n=172)	Statistical indices
	Abused (n=131) n (%)	Not abused (n=41) n (%)		
Age group (years)				
<10	6 (31.6)	13 (68.4)	19	Fishers exact p<0.001*
10-13	57 (68.7)	26 (31.3)	83	
14-17	68 (97.1)	2 (2.9)	70	
Level of education				
Currently in primary	34 (50.0)	34 (50.0)	68	Fishers exact p<0.001*
Currently in secondary	79 (94.0)	5 (6.0)	84	
Drop out	18 (90.0)	2 (10.0)	20	
Years of hawking				
Less than 1 year	24 (61.5)	15 (38.5)	39	Fishers exact p=0.028*
1-4 years	94 (79.0)	25 (21.0)	119	
Above 4 years	13 (92.9)	1 (7.1)	14	
Hawk all day				
Yes	55 (79.7)	14 (20.3)	69	x ² = 0.789 p=0.372
No	76 (73.8)	27 (26.2)	103	
Socio economic class				
II	4 (66.7)	2 (33.3)	6	Fishers exact p=0.041*
III	34 (68.0)	16 (32.0)	50	
IV	65 (75.6)	21 (24.4)	86	
V	28 (93.3)	2 (6.7)	30	

*Statistically significant

There may also be some form of sexual dysfunction in the long term.¹³ One form of abuse reported by over half of the respondents was inappropriate touching. This was comparable to 53.4% reported in a study in western Nigeria,¹¹ but lower than 81.5% reported in another study in eastern Nigeria.¹ Such touches which include touching the breasts, buttocks and other sensitive areas of the body are often carried out by perpetrators who have more intimate acts in mind. This could arouse sexual desires in the innocent children who may subsequently get persuaded into more intimate sexual activities. Sexual abuse also includes use of words suggestive of intention to indulge in any form of sexual practice or activity.¹ This

was experienced by more than half of the respondents in the present study which is comparable to the 52.5% recorded in a previous study in Oyo State, Nigeria.¹¹ These abuses are mostly meted out by adult males who gain audience from the hawkers by showing interest in wanting to buy their wares.

One of the gravest forms of sexual abuse that female hawkers are exposed to is rape. Previous studies have reported rape prevalence of 4.5%, and 31.5% among hawkers in North Western and South Eastern parts of Nigeria, respectively.^{4, 5} In the present study, about a tenth of the respondents had been raped. In addition to health consequences such as injuries to the underdeveloped perineum, such children

could develop emotional problems like fear, shame, guilt and depression which might persist to adulthood.

Table 6: Predictors of any form of sexual abuse among female child hawkers

Variables	Odd ratio	95% CI	p-value
Age group (years)			
<10	Ref		
10-13	2.67	1.72-14	0.009*
14-17	14.70	2.05-105.14	0.007*
Level in school			
Currently in primary	Ref		
Currently in secondary	4.42	0.84-23.18	0.079
School Dropout	7.37	2.21-24.59	0.001*
Years of hawking			
Less than 1 year	Ref		
1-4 years	1.24	0.45-3.42	0.677
Above 4 years	7.14	0.58-8.74	0.125
Socio economic class			
II	Ref		
III	3.16	0.30-33.26	0.339
IV	5.00	0.48-51.98	0.178
V	23.44	1.33-401.67	0.031*

*Statistically significant

One in three of the hawkers had been exposed to penetrative sexual intercourse which was either outright rape or from enticement. This figure is higher than the 17.2% reported in a previous study in Eastern Nigeria¹ but lower than findings in another study in Western Nigeria, where 67% of female hawkers had penetrative sexual intercourse.¹¹ In many instances, these sexual acts are unprotected. For instance, in the present study more than two thirds of the respondents engaged in unprotected intercourse despite all the attendant risks. Such practices exposed the adolescents to numerous risks such as sexually transmitted infections (STI) including HIV. It was therefore not surprising that 13.5% had past history of STI.

Other common consequences of sexual abuse often reported among female hawkers are pregnancy and abortion.²⁷ Those who carry the pregnancies to term may have complications such as vesico-vaginal fistula due to the immaturity of the perineum of many of them. They may also suffer from different degrees of perineal injuries with short and long term consequences.¹ Some may attempt aborting the pregnancies, ending up with several complications. In the present study, more than 1 in 20 of the respondents admitted to having carried out abortion. Unsafe abortion is a significant cause of mortality and morbidity,²⁷ especially among the underage who may attempt to induce the abortion themselves or may even be given

deadly concoctions by the perpetrators in order to be free from the responsibilities associated with keeping the pregnancies.

One of the key reasons for street hawking identified in several studies was poverty^{5, 9, 20} In the present study, the parents of the hawkers were mainly from the low socio economic class, being traders or artisans, commonly having only primary level of education. Their income was unlikely to be enough in taking care of their usually large households. In such situations, parents often send the children to live with relatives or serve as maids to richer families or sell on the streets to augment the family income. The reason given for hawking by two thirds of the respondents in the present study was to support their families. This is consistent with findings of other studies.^{5, 14, 28} There is no denying that these young hawkers actually generate some income to augment their families' earnings as up to half of the hawkers in the present study reported earning ₦2,000-₦5,000 daily. The risks of hawking however far outweigh the gains. The desire to make money may contribute to the vulnerability of the girls who are sometimes offered money, shelter, food or gifts for sex.^{4, 10, 12} In the present study, among those who were enticed into sex, intercourse was engaged in exchange for mainly money, shelter and food. In a study in Abakaliki, Nigeria, 36.5% reported of occasions where someone bought all their goods or gave them extra money in exchange for sex.⁴ Similarly, in a study in Burkina Faso, 43.7% of the female

hawkers had received money or gifts for sex.¹²

Lack of school sponsorship also contributes to hawking by females.¹¹ In the present study, about a tenth hawked to raise school fees as less than half of the respondents received sponsorship from parents. The effect of street hawking on children education may lead to absenteeism, poor school performance and eventual dropout from school.²⁹ About a tenth of the child hawkers in the present study had dropped out of school. This possibly increased their vulnerability as it was observed that those who had dropped out of school were seven times more likely to be abused compared to those in primary school. This could be due to their regular presence at the hawking areas as they no longer go to school. When a family cannot afford fees for all their children, they often withdraw the female children compared to the male. This is because they prefer investing on the males as they are seen as future breadwinners, while the females would be married out.

Female hawkers often have to work virtually every day and some have been in the trade for many years. In the present study, 7 in 10 respondents had been hawking for 1-4 years with 40% hawking throughout the day. This prolonged exposure would very likely increase the risk of sexual assault among the respondents as they become familiar faces on the streets and easy targets for exploitation. Long hours of hawking could

however become a necessity in situations like parental death where the children may have to hawk in order to generate money to survive. In the present study, more than one tenth had lost both parents. Considering the reasons for hawking among the respondents in this study which included family support, sourcing for fees and feeding, poverty therefore seems to be a key determinant of street hawking among young females which exposes them to numerous hazards including sexual abuse.

Limitations: The findings of this study were based entirely on the information given by the respondents. This is considered a limitation as the extent of disclosure of accurate information on their sexual experiences may not have been total. Also, the respondents were not willing to spare too much time as they were anxious to sell their wares. This may have led to withholding certain information just to save time.

Conclusion: Sexual abuse of female child hawkers is a glaring problem in Uyo just like many parts of Nigeria and other developing countries. Majority of the hawkers in this study experienced a form of sexual abuse ranging from inappropriate touching to rape. Predictors of abuse included age, being a dropout and of low socio economic class. There is therefore a need to protect this age group, address the issues of school dropout and empower those in the low socio economic group.

Recommendations: Intensive enlightenment campaigns on the risks of female hawking should be carried out using different avenues such as the media, schools and places of worship. Vocational centres should be set up by government and other stakeholders to encourage skill acquisition and income generation by the unemployed. Free education up to secondary level is also advocated.

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