



Research Article

Youth Sexual Exploitation in Nigeria: A Call for an Urgent Multi-Pronged Approach in Response to the Current Emerging Trend

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Abstract

Introduction: Sexual exploitation among children, adolescents and young adults is a global public health menace. Within Nigeria, it is no longer news that a newfangled trend has emerged concerning the incessant and unwholesome advantage-taking of the youth by sexual exploitation perpetrators. Youth sexual exploitation appears to have been accepted as a norm, with no head-on approach to solve the problem in place. Surprisingly, YSE is now taking new paths, thus not only making the situation more complex, but inhumane with the latest case events. The article is a follow-up research in response to the current dimension of sexual exploitation among the youth in Nigeria. **Aim:** This article aims to bring to the fore the currently emerging and evolving trend concerning the forms of sexual exploitation against the youth in Nigeria, while proffering solutions through an approach based on the context of the issue. **Methodology:** This paper is a narrative review that provides an overview of existing academic literature, official reports, and media reports on youth sexual exploitation in Nigeria. **Findings:** The known forms of YSE have been unresolved and neglected to deteriorate to more complicated branches of YSE in Nigeria. Different factors are enhancing the trend, including individual, family, community and institutional factors. **Conclusion:** Social, cultural, and economic connections have been identified to be factorial in the unending and deteriorating menace of YSE. There is an urgent need for all relevant stakeholders to take bold steps using a multi-pronged approach to curb the menace.

Keywords

Sexual Exploitation, Abuse, Victim, Children, Youths, Nigeria

1. Introduction

Sexual exploitation (SE) means the abuse of an individual's position to obtain sexual gratification, and it occurs in different forms including economic, social, or political [1]. Youth

sexual exploitation (YSE) refers to any form of sexual act with children and youth below the age of 18 years in exchange for something such as drugs, food, money, shelter, or any other

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Received: 11 November 2025; Accepted: 23 March 2026; Published: 22 July 2026



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consideration [2]. The World Health Organization (WHO) describes sexual exploitation and abuse as an echo of a failure to provide fundamental protection for those in need of it [3]. Youth sexual exploitation has been recognized not only as a violation of human right, but also a global public health issue, entailing an extreme category of child sexual abuse [4]. Both local and international evidence have revealed a relatively high burden of YSE in Nigeria. The United Nations Children Fund reported that about 25% of girls and 10% of boys in Nigeria have experienced sexual abuse before attaining 18 years of age [5]. The prevalence is more among girls than in boys, with more abusers noted to be males, and are usually known people to the victims [6]. The purpose of this paper is to review emerging trends in YSE in Nigeria, analyze the underlying factors, and propose a multifaceted intervention approach.

2. Interconnections Between Known and Emerging Patterns of Sexual Exploitation in Nigeria

The two main forms of sexual abuse among children, are the “childhood sexual abuse” (CSA) and “commercial sexual exploitation of children” (CSEC) [6]. These aforementioned categories appear not to be uncommon in Nigeria, with the almost daily reports (both officially with the law enforcement agencies and unofficially in the social media) of children being sexually abused in the country. There are different known and emerging dimensions regarding the YSE trend in Nigeria.

The Online form of Sexual Exploitation, affect children, adolescent and young adults these days [7, 8]. It is also mostly common among the youth who either appear to be abusing themselves by self-displaying their bodies on social media (mostly ladies), or by a known perpetrator who uploads and publicizes a video content of a victim, following or during an abuse committed without the consent of the voluntarily or involuntarily victimized partner. This trend of using social media to abuse victims appear to be unabated as it has become a norm for anyone (usually adolescents and young adults) to record and post videos of themselves on the social media. Online YSE is becoming popular mainly because an individual wants to gain followers on social media, and possibly financial gains (due to economic hardships), as content creation, is a rising job for the unemployed youth in the country in recent times. Many young ones have been lured into more conspicuous abuse and even demise, by individuals who became attracted to the unsuspecting victim's self-uploaded video contents. This form of sexual exploitation may result in hook up culture following online self-disclosure.

Furthermore, another well-known branch of sexual exploitation in Nigeria is the issue of ‘baby factories’. This term refers to ‘institutions where young people give birth to children who are then placed for sale on the illegal adoption market’ [9]. Baby factories (BF) means any location where women and

young teenage girls are made to become pregnant (usually impregnated by strangers contracted by the factory owners) voluntarily or forcefully, and are kept illegally till they give birth, and their babies are then sold for monetary gains [9]. Although the victims might have gone to join such institutions voluntarily, they are made to be exposed to unknown men, whose health status are hidden from the ladies. In addition, the ladies are usually placed under movement restriction, and thus are not free to seek antenatal care (unless if one is secretly arranged by the BF owners). Consequently, both the biological mothers and their babies could have been infected with diseases, whose source could not be traced, and for which both victims are not given either preventive or curative care.

The baby factories have been found to disguise as maternity homes, hospitals, orphanages, or social welfare homes [9]. Without doubt, and as the general law of the country is known to be against such institutions, these popular activities which are illegal, are also against the right of the child. It means that the child is born without an identifiable father, and a mother who almost immediately disowns the same child through commercialization. Consequently, such a child is at the mercy of his/her inheritor who usually uses monetary power to acquire the child, thus, the child's future is on a rough path. In fact, there may be a series of inheritors, with each one buying and selling the child for financial profits before the child finally gets to a terminal illegal adopter. All these transactions and trafficking usually occur without record or the ability to trace either the source or the destination of such children, not until luck runs out of one or more of the perpetrators, and law enforcement agents swing into action that such illegal business comes to the fore.

Another recently rising and incessant form of sexually-related abuse is the ‘Hook-up’ culture of many young ladies these days. This lifestyle has been found to be associated with sexually transmitted infections [10]. Hook-up has been described as a fleeting sexual encounter involving individuals who are strangers or acquaintances, and who are not in an agreed relationship, with no plan of future together [11, 12]. The hook-up girls are not usually the regular commercial sex workers (who usually have locations known to their customers), but only gets connected to a newly-known transient male friends (mainly through social media) [13]. In Nigeria, usually, the male visitor picks the lady up at a location only known to the duo, for the night, for an undisclosed location, and only for the lady to be alighted forcefully (many are pushed out of a vehicle) in the following morning by the road side, apparently in a subconscious state. The lady victims are then noted by passers-by and bystanders, to be in an altered state of mind. Due to socio-cultural (and possibly spiritual) beliefs, almost no one wants to get close to the victim in order to be rescued immediately (and especially when the perpetrator is still in sight while driving off), but almost only when local authorities are called to the victim's rescue. The aforementioned complication of YSE appears to have emanated from an unrestricted,

unregulated, and usually presumed cordial relationships between partners who are not legally married. The male friend, who is almost always unknown to the family and friends of the lady victim, consequently takes a possibly fatal advantage of the lady victim. Unsurprisingly, most of the activities almost always happen in the dark hours when both partners involved could hardly identify each other again after the brief period of engagement, making it difficult for law enforcement agents to be able to get hold of the perpetrators. Moreover, those involved in hook-up may feel frustrated in the long term and divert to engagement in baby factory work.

A not-too-long ago trend is the 'Sex-for-grades' lecturers who were caught following reports of their sexual exploitation activities against either self-selected or willing university students [14, 15]. The culprits engaged in this branch of sexual exploitation were university lecturers who were using their status to sexually exploit students (majorly females) by exchanging sexual gratification for the assurance of dishing out academic grades to the students in order to ensure that the victims pass their courses itch-free. Although, it appears that many students could have been deriving satisfaction from such engagement regarding their academic outcomes, luck usually runs out of the unsuspecting lecturer when he encounters a student who is uncooperative. Exposing such perpetrating lecturer by the different student subsequently have led to more students coming out to corroborate the single report with their previously hidden experiences with the same lecturer. Furthermore, the beginning of 'sex-for-grades' could have resulted from ladies who are students who were practising 'hook-up' to extend to their school in order to enhance their grades by engaging their lecturers. Recent cases of 'sex-for-grades' that reflected the upsurge took place in some tertiary educational institutions, and the affected university authorities took bold measures to bring the lecturers to book, and ensured that the law took its course [14, 15].

3. Factors Contributing to The Emerging Trend

The topical diversification of the pathway of YSE in Nigeria might not have started overnight. There exist certain unsuspected factors which could be contributing the relatively new evolutions of YSE that are occurring in the contemporary life.

Possible Depreciation of Moral Discipline among young people: The African culture is known for moral discipline as a norm regarding upbringing of the young ones. However, the increasing adoption of Western culture and civilization as a way of life in many African societies in its hook, line and sinker mode, has made many young people on the continent to become victims of their behaviours. Many young ones tend to imbibe the freedom-approach lifestyle in a country where the law may not be there to protect them when they are abused sexually. So, why would a rational, young person trail the path

of hanging out with a stranger, whose intention is unknown, and whom the law is not likely to be able to trace most times when an abuse or criminal activity occurs? As many sexual exploiters are innocent-looking, the unsuspecting victim tends to trust the would-be perpetrator completely in their dealings with one another [16]. Traditionally, sexual misconduct is not promoted in local communities in Nigeria. In addition, getting connected with strangers (people unknown to one's family) is usually unwelcomed in the traditional African societies. These highlighted cultural norms that were usually incorporated into behaviours in the past have far-reaching indirect protective measures. On the contrary, they are not appreciated by young people in the contemporary period in the country. Therefore, neglecting the moral-promoting behaviours appear to be consequently resulting in the young people becoming victims of sexual exploitation.

Economic constraints and search for fast life: Many young people, who may not even have financial responsibilities on their necks have been sunken in the feeling of economic hardship. So, the youth population appears to focus on how to make fast money, rather than how to gain knowledge and skills needed to be financially independent and survive in any atmosphere. Thus, the males find it relatively easier to take advantage of ladies in order to make quick money, and an indirect means is to entice ladies through friendships or relationships that have no focused goal. On the other hand, young ladies believe that their bodies are a natural gift for them to utilize in making money overnight, thereby ending up in the hands of an unsuspected sexual exploiter.

Collapsing Societal Institutions: The family, educational, and religious institutions are known to provide strong foundations for positive future lives of young people in the Nigerian, and most African societies. However, the contemporary culture of *getting civilization from across the Atlantic*, appears not to be helpful in solving the issue of youth sexual exploitation locally. In a polar dimension are the reported cases of intra-familial abuse which are strange to the local culture [17]. Within families, parents appear not to possess spare time to tutor and explain sexual exploitation to their children, who are indirectly left to protect themselves against unknown sexual abusers. Parents are mostly engaged in their work, while either having little or no time to discuss YSE, or outrightly avoiding any discussion concerning YSE with their children. Furthermore, educational institutions are not formally empowered to teach students about YSE in order for them to be able to know the preventive and protective measures. Any attempt by well-meaning lecturers may be seen as a misconception of trying to expose students to, and promoting illicit sexual activities, which are culturally unacceptable. Surprisingly, learning institutions which are regarded as ivory towers have become one of the unwelcomed hubs where sexual exploitation is taking place.

In another pole of religious institutions are the unusual reports of some institutions serving as avenues to promote sexual exploitation [18]. Religious institutions are traditionally

highly respected by people in Nigeria, as religious teachings are known to guide people's lifestyle and culture. However, emerging behaviours of young people reflects that there is neglect of religious teachings by many young people who possibly see no much benefits from religious doctrines, but focused solely on the search for their means of survival. Therefore, sexual exploitation and abuse could be visualized as a means of making ends meet, irrespective of family, educational or religious perspectives. Consequently, the victims of sexual abuse, could have become targets by serial or chanced perpetrators when the stated institutions are not used to protect the youth against YSE.

Discrimination and Stigmatization against victims: The fear of discrimination and stigmatization against victims of YSE could contribute to fewer reports of cases to law agencies. The cases reported to the police appear from evidence not to be properly managed according to the law as the victims or her family may not want to be known. Matters could be made worse when families prefer to resolve the cases in-house, and thus prevent the law to serve justice. Thus, the perpetrator could therefore feel untouchable, thereby enabling him to commit more of such abuses. This course might have provided the enabling atmosphere for the evolving forms of YSE being experienced in Nigeria.

4. A Need for Urgent Action by Stakeholders

The known forms of sexual abuse among the youth in Nigeria are still floating in the sea of health issues, as they have not been resolved. Thus, the emerging trend of YSE appear to be an aftermath of the neglect of the usual YSE menace, which is now evolving into more complex-appearing social and health problems. The perpetrators of YSE against the youth population have obviously devised more detrimental methods of carrying out their abuse activities, which are deteriorating into crimes under the societal law.

The currently emerging and evolving patterns of youth sexual exploitation in Nigeria would ultimately culminate into a cycle of events that could affect virtually every family in the country if an urgent action is not taken by the stakeholders to decimate the rapidly deteriorating issue. Thus, it could result into a continuous problem that affects people across generations.

5. Multi-Pronged Approach to Manage the Menace

Although an array of strategies are in existence globally which comprises of preventive and curative methods [16], an all-encompassing strategic plan that entails the engagement of all stakeholders in Nigeria cannot be over-emphasized. Therefore, a multi-faceted approach would be required to curb the

rapidly deteriorating menace of the emerging and evolving dimensions of YSE. The risk factors in different context may need to be identified and controlled with counselling, engagement, enforcing policies and partnering with communities and institutions.

The orientation of individuals need to be re-structured regarding the life goals of people vis-à-vis the societal laws. The need to make ends meet by all means does not indicate a self-compulsion to involve oneself in sexual exploitation against any other person especially the young ones who are entering the phase of contributing to leadership and upholding professional services for the entire citizens in any community or country. The male youth population especially needs a resetting of their orientation towards their female counterparts.

The family setting needs to be re-aligned for the proper up-bringing towards attaining growth and development, not only for individual life goal pathway but also to be in congruent with the laws of the land. Young ones need to be cautioned concerning the possible consequences of engaging in sexual exploitation. Adolescents and young girls especially need to be made aware that they are potential targets and needs to learn and practice preventive and protective measures against YSE. Parents need to know the friends and peers that their children keep in order to be able to monitor and possibly take measures to protect their wards earlier.

Educational institutions need to partner with other social institutions in order to ensure balance regarding the form of sexual education that young people need within the context of their communities. Respect for individual career and life goals need to be upheld by co-students and teachers without trampling on the rights of other people. Higher institutions of learning need to educate students on the laws of the society concerning involvement on YSE activities.

Religious institutions should be encouraged to enhance orientation regarding the prevention and protection against YSE and the negative spiritual effects of engaging in such. This approach may work more effectively when applied right from the childhood ages when African children mostly follow their parents to religious organizations before they become more engaged in study and career life.

Government laws and policies on the subject matter need to be disseminated among youth organizations for them to be aware of the dos and don'ts expected of young people in the society. Enforcement of the available policies and acts should be ensured irrespective of the family views which may tend towards excluding the law agencies in resolving cases of YSE. Collaboration with stakeholders in every community is important in order to ensure success at each branch of managing the emerging and evolving trend of youth sexual exploitation in Nigeria and beyond.

Based on the evolving patterns of youth sexual exploitation (YSE) identified in this review, it is evident that the Nigerian government must adopt more proactive, comprehensive, and context-specific measures to prevent further deterioration of the problem. The emerging forms of YSE appear to stem from

the longstanding neglect of earlier manifestations, allowing perpetrators to develop new and more harmful strategies that now pose serious social and legal threats. Therefore, urgent and decisive governmental action is crucial to break the cycle of exploitation that risks extending across generations.

First, the government needs to strengthen and update existing legal and policy frameworks to reflect the rapidly changing nature of exploitation. This includes enforcing stricter penalties, closing legal loopholes, and integrating newly emerging forms of abuse—such as online grooming, transactional exploitation, and organized networks—into child protection laws. Establishing fast-track courts specifically for sexual exploitation cases would also help to reduce judicial delays, which often discourage reporting and hinder justice.

Second, improving law enforcement capacity is essential. This can be achieved through specialized training for police officers, investigators, and prosecutors to equip them with the skills needed to identify, track, and prosecute perpetrators who increasingly employ sophisticated and concealed methods. The formation of dedicated anti-exploitation task forces at both national and state levels would further enhance surveillance, intelligence gathering, and timely intervention.

Third, the government must reinforce child and youth protection systems. Strengthening social welfare structures, community-based surveillance networks, and school-based protection programs will enable early detection of at-risk youth. Expanding shelters, counseling services, and legal aid centers is also critical to provide adequate support for victims, who often experience long-term psychological, social, and economic consequences.

Fourth, preventive strategies through public education are vital. Nationwide awareness campaigns targeting parents, schools, religious institutions, and community leaders are needed to improve understanding of YSE, including how to recognize signs of exploitation and the appropriate channels for reporting. Incorporating age-appropriate sexual abuse prevention education into school curricula would empower young people to identify risky situations and seek help.

Finally, addressing the socioeconomic factors that heighten vulnerability is indispensable. Poverty, unemployment, and weakened family structures contribute significantly to exploitation risk. Government-supported empowerment programs, scholarships, vocational training, and youth employment initiatives could mitigate these underlying drivers. In addition, mental health services and counseling facilities should be strengthened to support resilience and reduce susceptibility to manipulation by perpetrators.

6. Conclusion

Sexual exploitation among the young has recently taken a new dimension which is emerging and evolving with time. The traditionally known forms of YSE appears to have been

left to deteriorate and consequently become more complicated with the spate of unusual news of extreme forms of sexual exploitation affecting the young population. Therefore, a multi-dimensional approach would be essential in order to curtail the issue head-on by the stakeholders, and thus decimating the ongoing tragic cases of youth sexual exploitation in Nigeria.

Abbreviations

SE	Sexual Exploitation
YSE	Youth Sexual Exploitation
CSA	Childhood Sexual Abuse
CSEC	Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children
BF	Baby Factories

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Ndofireke Ubokutom Udom: Methodology, Resources, Writing – review & editing

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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