



Cultural Inhibitions and the Rising Rate of Prostitution in Niger Delta

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Abstract

In recent years, the Niger Delta has been experiencing a number of social, political and economic challenges, ranging from extreme militancy to prostitution. Among other factors, the right to own property and a lack of employment opportunities remain major contributing factors to rising rates of prostitution, especially with respect to cultural inhibitions. It is against this backdrop that this paper examines the cultural practices in this region, with the broad aim of understanding the impact of culture on people. A likert-type scale was used in this research and was applied among a population of 300 respondents. Based on the findings of this study, we recommend income redistribution, the provision of employment opportunities, and a comprehensive land reform system as possible paths to the reduction of prostitution.

Keywords: Cultural Inhibitions, Prostitution, Niger-Delta

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INTRODUCTION

All people, irrespective of race, have beliefs and practices that they use to structure their lives and create social and personal meaning. These practices and beliefs in turn influence people's perceptions, attitudes and the management of their lives. Culture, in other words, is the foundation of individual and collective experiences.

Despite the pervasiveness of such beliefs and practices, it is often still considered inappropriate to discuss cultural issues. It is however, unfortunate that at this age and time, people still frown when cultural issues are being discussed.

According to Sanderson (1988), culture is the total life way of people and for the social scientist, culture means much more than just some aspects of human social existence. Culture includes all the conditions in which men and women are born, brought up, live, work, procreate and perish.

The ability of people to leave behind or adopt certain cultural practices is often constrained by poverty and fear of social exclusion. Those in such a situation in many ways have relatively less power to socially or economically reject the culture they know. Some of these more controversial practices in the Niger Delta include widowhood inheritances and the land-tenure system both of which deprive women of the right to property ownership.

With respect to prostitution, our argument here can be captured by the notion that cultural practices predispose inhabitants to various kinds of behaviours. This is then compounded by the fact that that under certain economic conditions, individuals may be rendered vulnerable and compelled to do things they would ordinarily stand against. According to Karl Marx (in Ekpenjong, 2003), man's pre-occupations in life, first and foremost are "food, clothing and shelter". People are thus quite strongly compelled to achieve these objectives and it is only after these have been achieved that is possible to consider other more abstract goals and values. In this context, prostitution is very much a means to a survival-based end. The word "prostitution" in fact is derived from the Latin word "prostituere" which means to "set up for sale". And while it may be argued that the world is experiencing an ongoing sexual revolution, this notion sheds little light on the world of prostitution as most people are engage in paid sex to achieve goals unrelated to procreation and/or pleasure (Igbaniibo & Odiike, 2008).

The general purpose of this study points at finding an understanding for the rising rate of prostitution in the Niger Delta area of Nigerian where oil exploration and exploitation is largely the business of the day. Based on the above, it is possible to hypothesize an inverse relationship between the cultural practices of a people and their economic conditions. It is thus also possible to hypothesize a relationship between the profitability of prostitution and the number of persons involved.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

The Niger Delta People: An Overview

The Niger Delta is one of a few contemporary environments today that still sustains oil production. It is in the words of Ogon (2003), the most endowed wetlands in the world stretching across approximately 70,000 square kilometers and is largely made up of mangroves, swamps and wetlands. It is one of five major Deltas in the world, making it not just a national, but an international asset.

Today there are more than 3000 human settlements across the Niger Delta (Isoun, 2001). A number of cultural bonds, as manifested in music, dance, theatre and masquerades, help to maintain strong connections within and across these settlements. Trade also continues to play a key role in fostering amicable cross-settlement relationships. Likewise, the environment of the Niger Delta has always been very hospitable and contributed to positive and cooperative relations. It has generally been marked by an ample supply of valuable plants, animals and mineral resources (Alaoga and Tekena, 1989) and by an absence of natural hazards such as deserts, ice, floods, typhoons, mountains, volcanoes and earthquakes.

During the pre-colonial period, the products and by products of the area's natural resources led to a great deal of self-sufficiency, and to inter-community trade along both river and land routes. The people inhabiting the area have traditionally been very hard working and their extended family structure offered an added source of revenue or income security. Generally, most needs were met through some combination of fishing, farming, trading, hunting, weaving carving, and other occupations and the people cannot therefore be described as poor.

As the colonial era settled on the region, fishing, farming and trading occupations were slowly eroded by the growth and development of small-scale city states. Despite the area's wealth of natural resources, including petroleum – the mainstay of the country's economy today, the region has remained largely underdeveloped. High levels of hunger and poverty characterize the region today.

Culture: An Overview

The concept of culture is generally applied to the total ways of life of a society. Some societies, however, are of great complexity. For this reason, Anikpo and Atemie (1999), opine that it is important to take into consideration the nature of various cultural patterns that exist in complex societies such as the Niger Delta. The present analytical problem is thus determining how to establish the influence of these diverse cultural practices on the current level of prostitution.

Every culture has at its basis, a set of interacting systems that perpetuate cultural practices over time (Ritzer, 2000). These include cultural taboos and sanctions that are established to control undesirable social behaviours. As Chukwunye (2008) observes, however, the cultural practices that often result, including the land tenure system, the culture of silence, and widowhood inheritances, prostitution is on the rise.

Most modern urban industrial societies tend to have a high degree of social differentiation and extremely complex occupational structures. Their populations often include people from diverse racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds. These and other kinds of social differentiations in turn serve as the bases for the development of subcultures. The concept of subculture has become increasingly important in modern sociological enterprises as researchers have sought to understand how people in various positions in the complex social structure have discovered ways of dealing with the often unique problems that confront them. It is from this perspective that we argue that many of those struggling to survive economically found new possibilities in prostitution as solution to their problems. In other words, their unique life situation pushed them to develop a subculture that then allowed them to fend for themselves as human beings preoccupied with food, clothing and shelter.

The Land Tenure System

From the beginning of human history, individuals and societies everywhere had to survive by meeting a number of fundamental material needs, the most important of which was food. According to Anikpo and Atemie (1999), humans are thus, above everything else, workers or producers. It is through productive activity that men and women are able to obtain the means needed to sustain life from nature. Humans must eat to live, therefore must work to eat. A number of problems on this path have and continue to be confronted.

In the Niger Delta, the land tenure system remains among the most constraining of these problems. Land by its nature is the economic and subsistence base of a people (Obioha, 2004). The importance of land accounts for its use as the base for agricultural activities across the African continent. Not surprisingly, land now constitutes the ecological background against which the social, political and economic activities of a people are determined (Uzorka, Okemini and Odoemelan, nd). Most of the settlement configurations we know today are related in one way or another with the land. The land and its influence on early human organization have in turn informed the basis for institutionalizing how land is to be exploited.

The rules and regulations governing the acquisition and ownership of land in the Niger Delta today stem from the land laws and customs of traditional African societies (Obioha, 2004). These laws derive their authority from their basis in antiquity. Anikpo (2004) argues that these laws define the framework for tenurial procedures today including inheritance rule, land pledging, gift land, and kola tenancy. Despite these general systems that have survived generations, there is no single land ownership pattern common to all African societies.

The system of land holding recognized by most African customary laws is neither absolutely communal nor individual in nature (Elias, 1951). In all patterns of ownership, however, women are at a serious disadvantage. They are restricted from fully partaking in the sharing, no matter their age or social status. This system of tenurial practice thus, apart from affecting the development of agriculture, plays a significant role in the level of prostitution in most societies today.

Land tenure as described by Olajuwon, Olabisi & Essang (1981), is the “body of rights and relationships between men that have been developed to govern their behaviour in the use and control of land and its resources”. According to Cole in Bale & Smith (1990) traditional inheritance practices preclude subdivision of land holdings, passing intact to son-in-laws through daughters. This thus suggests that women are not in any way supposed to own land or be allotted land, hence the automatic transfer of the right to the land to the husband after marriage.

The argument of this paper is such that, because they are often forced to fend for themselves in a society that systematically prevents their accumulation of wealth, many women have resorted to using what they have to get what

they need to survive. This notion is supported by the fact that women are unable to obtain simple bank loans in such societies because they do not have landed properties with which to back their loan applications.

The Extended Family System

Marriage of one man to many women (polygamous marriage) is a common phenomenon in Africa. Polygamous marriages do not exclude the merging of extended families, thus making the burden of the family life particularly taxing. It is within the context of these often quite large family groupings that many households in Africa often face ignorance of the misdeeds of their female children.

Traditionally, the extended family formed the basis of recruitment into the social system (Ekpenyoung, 2003) and played very an important economic role given its necessity for large scale agricultural cultivation. Most modern societies don't have enough land for such cultivation, given social tenurial patterns, and the extended family has thus come to constitute itself a burden that often requires prostitution for its sustenance.

Widowhood Inheritance

According to Anikpo and Atemie (2006), widowhood inheritance is a variant of the levirate system. The defining feature of the widowhood inheritance is such that the new husband makes little payment to the wife's kin to inherit his deceased kinsman's wife. Children of this new wedlock belong to the living husband and bear his name. Under this system, the widow does not have a say as her rejection of the new husband will earn her a severe punishment. In some instances she may be asked to leave her home, while in other cases her children may be taken away from her. Against this background, most women are likely to remain and marry the new husband. For those who do resist, few options are available to them upon which to build new lives. The majority end up in prostitution because of their need to take care of themselves and their children.

Prostitution

Prostitution is a practice that exists in every society. It is believed that an estimated 1 million people across the globe enter into the illegal sex trade every year (Jackson, Children's Rights World Congress, 2005). A prostitute is a person who accepts money in return for sexual intercourse or other sexual acts. According to Obi (1987), prostitution is an indiscriminate exchange of sexual favours for Naira and Kobo. Most prostitutes accept a number of customers, feel no emotional tie to any, and use the trade as a major or sole source of income.

The act of prostitution by definition joins together two forms of social power, sex and money, in one interaction. In both realms men hold substantial and systematic power over women. In prostitution, these power disparities merge in an act which both assigns and reaffirms the dominant social status of men over the subordinated social status of women (O'Naill, 2001).

An important contention advanced by pro-sex work feminists such as Carol Queen notes that all too often feminists who are critical of prostitution have failed to adequately consider the view points of women who are themselves engaged in sex work, choosing instead to base their arguments in theory or outdated experiences. The argument here is that there is serious problem with the anti-prostitution position (Sullwan 2010) and, according to Sarah Bromberg, "it evolves from a political theory that is over-verbalized, generalized, and too often uses stereotypical notions of what a prostitute is". In many ways, the anti-prostitution position can therefore be seen as part of a binary construction of women's identity as either "good girl" or "bad girl" (Farley, 2000).

The position of this paper is that those involved in sex work are not there because they have been forced in by men, but because it represents a means to an end. It is for this reason that pro-sex worker theorists say that it is unproductive to conceive of prostitution as an industry (Julie, 2006). Rather than focusing on getting rid of this "industry" efforts would be better directed towards changes that would improve the lives of sex workers as sex workers.

Reasons for Prostitution

There are a number of social and economic reasons that women many become interested in prostitution. These include:

Economic reasons

Ostentatious lifestyles, as noted by Igbanbo and Odike in their article on prostitution, cannot be blamed for an interest in prostitution. The economic problems that people encounter generally stem from the cultural conditions that people find themselves in and have little control over. While it is possible for some cultures to provide means and opportunities for all to live comfortably, most cultures are characterized by difficulties that impoverish at least some of their subjects. As noted above, for example, polygamous marriage, an institution strongly tied to culture and cultural beliefs often contributes to the prevalence of prostitution (Igbanbo & Odike, 2008).

Social reasons

The social causes of prostitution may include the influence of friends or peers who are already involved in sex work. Living in an environment of affluence may also prove to be a “pull factor” as some may not have the capacity to resist the influence of money and what money can buy. The Niger Delta is a region that can be described as flowing with milk and honey. At the same time, it is characterized by high levels of poverty. This combination of wealth and poverty is dangerous, like fuel and fire, and may explode at any moment.

METHODOLOGY

The research population for this study was drawn from the nine states that constitute the Niger Delta. The population was comprised of 10 (3.3%) traditional rulers, 270 (90%) randomly selected prostitutes and 20 heads of families (6.7%) who have children that are in one way or another involved in sex work. Of the total respondents (300), 270 were, as noted above, sex workers whereas 30 (10%) were deemed to be custodians of traditional cultural values and may understand the impact of culture on the life of the people within the geo-political area.

A likert-type scale was used in this research because it bests helps respondents to succinctly evaluate the possible cause(s) of prostitution and the impact of culture on prostitution. According to Kerlinger (1973), likert-type scales are ratings scale of approximately equal “attitude value” that enable respondents to indicate some degree of either agreement or disagreement.

On the whole the research questionnaire for this study was tailored to suit the demographic information of respondents including their age, gender, social status, educational qualifications, and where applicable, the duration of their employment as a sex worker. Given the often low educational attainment of many respondents it was necessary to design and use a very simple questionnaire (Ololube, 2009).

DATA ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

This study examines the impact of cultural inhibitions on prostitution in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria. To arrive at the study’s results, the spearman rank correlation order was used as an analytical tool. Based on this statistical tool we determined that cultural inhibitions are, to a large extent, a contributing factor to rising rates of prostitution in the area. This was confirmed in answers to questions about the impact of the income on living standards. Approximately 70% of the sex workers polled indicated that they were ready to leave the industry should another attractive and well-paying occupation present itself. The cost of living in the Niger Delta is presently very high. The hardship this can cause, especially when among young women to whom little policy attention is paid, is significant. In this context, it thus becomes easy to see how women will use what they have to get what they need. From the perspective of sex workers and potential sex workers, the foreign money that has come to the oil rich region has made the practice even more attractive. Although the number of sex workers is growing by the day, they are still few relative to the size of the population and the demand for paid sex services, making the industry even more lucrative and thus attractive.

Table 1: Computation of Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient

S/n	X	Y	RX	RY	RX-RY	(RX-RY) ²
1	5	5	2	2.5	-0.5	0.25
2	5	4	2	9	-7	49
3	4	4	7.5	9	-1.5	2.25
4	4	5	7.5	2.5	5	25
5	4	4	7.5	9	-1.5	2.25
6	4	4	7.5	2.5	5	2.25
7	5	4	7.5	2.5	5	49
8	4	5	7.5	2.5	5	25
9	3	4	12.5	9	3.5	12.25
10	4	4	7.5	9	-1.5	2.25
11	4	5	7.5	2.5	5	25
12	3	4	12.5	9	3.5	12.25
13	2	3	14	14	0	0
14	4	1	7.5	15	-7.5	56.25
15	1	4	15	9	6	36
						$\Sigma 229$

Rho = 4.31

DISCUSSION

In the course of testing the hypotheses of this study, the findings suggested that there is indeed a relationship between cultural inhibitions and prostitution. At the same time, the Niger Delta is a region of great wealth and abject poverty. Here, wealth circulates in the hands of the few lucky enough to be gainfully employed in the oil industry or as politicians. There have thus emerged two classes of individuals: those who have no money (or opportunity or means of livelihood) and those who have all of the above with some to spare.

The results also show that many prostitutes would have left sex work had it not been for family problems. Most of the sex worker interviewed noted that they were merely using what they had to get what they needed given their family's financial situation.

It was also found in this study that women with the lowest levels of education and women from the most disadvantaged racial and ethnic minorities are overrepresented in prostitution. This would seem to suggest that prostitution for many is less of a free choice than it is often conveyed as in popular or conservative culture. If prostitution is a free choice, why are the women with the fewest choices the ones most often doing it?

CONCLUSION

As with many issues in the field of development, there is a diversity of opinions on prostitution. While many see prostitution as a free choice, this paper contends otherwise. Very often those engaged in prostitution have been compelled to become so because of the conditions they found themselves in. This study has explored the various cultural practices perceived to be inhibiting the woman from living a life comparable to that of their male counterparts. This paper has argued that there is a relationship between cultural inhibitions and prostitution in the Niger Delta.

In the light of the above argument, an examination of the culture and the socio-economic life of the Niger Delta people was offered. Until oil was discovered and exploited in the region, very little prostitution existed. This however, gave much credence to the Marxian dictum that changes in the economic base of a society produce corresponding changes in the entire system. The social challenges in the Niger Delta today thus reflect the conditions the people found themselves in as a result of an oil induced consciousness. This situation is amplified by the inability of the peripheral capitalist state of Nigeria to put in place policies to meet the development needs of the oil bearing communities. Coupled with the cultural inhibitions discussed, women began to enter prostitution at an increasing pace.

Recommendations

This article may be unbalanced towards certain viewpoints, but it does aim as its sole objective to understand why prostitution is on the rise in the Niger Delta, despite the affluence of politicians and oil workers in the area. It is in recognition of this fact that we make the following recommendations to help lessen the need of women to turn to this occupation:

Employment for all: one of the greatest challenges of the current situation in the region is unemployment. Thousands of people roam the streets every day without jobs, and more importantly, without food. Under such conditions, very few are likely to resist the lucrative temptation of prostitution.

Income redistribution: income redistribution is necessary especially at this time to further bridge the gap between the very rich and the very poor.

Cultural flexibility: culture is dynamic. This means that many detrimental cultural inhibitions may be relaxed to make life reasonably easier and more meaningful for people. Presently, the concept of extended family is on the verge of collapsing and it should be allowed to do so. Believe it or not the organic nature of the modern society does not make for wasteful expenditures. Such disintegration cannot be controlled and will in fact lessen the stress of everyday living.

Welfare system: oil production has been intrinsically hostile to the environment and the people of the Niger Delta region. The people are impoverished and are increasingly pushed into new depths of poverty. Those who are chronically jobless should receive a sum each month to cushion the effect of oil exploration in the region and reduce the rising rate of prostitution.

Tenurial system: the most constraining problem confronting women today is that of the land tenure system. The economic importance of land accounts for its use as the base for agricultural activities all across the African continent. Land thus constitutes the ecological background against which the social, political and economic activities of a people are determined. The system of land holdings recognized by most African customary laws is neither absolutely communal nor individual in nature. The important point here is that in whatever pattern of ownership adopted, women are restricted and disadvantaged. Reforms are needed to allow women to own land and to, if necessary, sell that land to pursue other economic endeavours and thus avoid having to sell her body for income.

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