

Impacts of Online Child Sexual Abuse in the Gambia: The Perspective of Child Protection Officers (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, preventive strategies; and institutional collaboration. Based on the findings the negative consequences encompass: psychological trauma, poor academic performance, mental disorders, drug abuse, diseases, stigma and discrimination, difficulties in the upbringing of children; and sanctions to the travel and hospitality industry.

Keywords:

Online, child, abuse, negative, consequences, 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 heighten and serious 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 contribute to the addressing of 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 level of impacts 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 and environment 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 in the fight against online child sexual abuse.

III. Results and Discussion

3.1 Negative Consequences of Online Child Sexual Abuse

In discussing the negative consequences of child sexual abuse including the online one by tourists in the tourism development areas, informants felt verily: psychological trauma, poor academic performance, mental disorders, drug abuse, diseases, stigma and discrimination, difficulties in the upbringing of children; and sanctions as captured in the below underneath.

Identified negative consequences	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Psychological trauma	16	12.0
Poor academic performance	29	22.0
Mental disorders	13	10.0
Drug abuse	19	14.3
Diseases	21	16.0
Stigma and discrimination	15	11.2
Difficulties in the upbringing of children	11	8.3
Sanctions	9	7.0
Total responses	133	100.00

Being subjected to unpleasant situations in which a third party benefits can be disturbing and if not professionally and timely managed can result in life lasting trauma. “.....traumatization, low self-esteem, marginalization by the community, lack of good health, begging in the streets, exposure to danger, dropping out of school, subjection to FGM.....all and many others come with child sexual and exploitation abuse.....it is truly bad...” emphasised an informant. Similarly another male informant was quick to assert: “.....it can slow their level of education and it is a stigma they go with so for young people especially students they might be very good in learning but because of this abuse they would not make it, it can lead them to become criminals.” These are supported by (Canadian Center for Child Protection, 2018) findings, child sexual abuse result in some short term and long term emotional traumas such as feeling anxious, worthlessness, shame, clinical depression, difficulties in maintaining friends, poor academic performance to the point that the victims had to transfer to another school.

In the same vein, victims of sexual abuse reported some mental disorder and drug abuse as a result of intense physical and psychological torture as eluded by a female informants: “.....it leads to mental disorder, vulnerability to peer pressure, like for example, when they are intoxicated where they can give less regards to their parents, relatives and friends....” This is in agreement with (Maestral, 2021) findings, the risks of children be online are numerous and include, poor academic performance, sleep disorder, online bullying, waste of prestigious time, mental disorder, suicide, reputation damage, emotional disturbance; and radicalization. Child sexual abuse has been associated with series of negative consequences such as risky behaviours namely early smoking, alcohol and substance abuse, physical and mental problems, suicidal thoughts, post-traumatic stress disorders, eating disorders, depression, anxiety; and chronic physical pain, (Kimber, Mctavish, Vanstone, Stewart, & Macmillan, 2020). Online child sexual abuse especially those caught in the trafficking ring end up being involved in crimes and criminal activities including early prostitution, hacking, cybercrimes, drug abuse and peddling, joining cults; and blackmails (Maestral, 2021).

Survivors of child sexual and exploitation especially those at tender age acquired serious transmissible infections as their body are not matured and they are not ready for any sexual activities particularly rape and other brutal sexual activities: “.....with traumatization, a child can be in class without concentrating due to the use of drugs and sometimes pains because of high level of this transmitted diseases,” lamented some informants. This is corroborated by (Ottisova, Hemmings, Howard, Zimmerman, & Oram, 2016), victims of sexual abuse claimed to have encountered lot of medical problems such as serious mental and psychosocial problems for example, headaches, stomachaches, backaches and similar problems. Additionally, (Ghorbani, Ghorbani, & Sharifi, 2014), revealed perpetrators in addition to disrespecting communities’ highly held social norms and values they have significantly contributed to the unprecedented increased in crimes and criminal activities in the societies and diseases like sexually transmitted infections including HIV/AIDS and new virus that were hardly known or seen in communities.

Similarly, some informants have observed that some causalities and families have been subjected to stigma and discrimination that are taking toll on the communities when it comes to supporting them and eliminating the menace as highlighted by informants: “.....the discrimination of victims of abuse in the communities is common practice in many local villages and it should be stopped as it doesn’t only create psychosocial problems for the victims and families but it prevents people from reporting case to ensure perpetrators are punish..... if not we will be seeing more cases in the communities.....” This concurs with (Brooks & Heaslip, n.d.), child-victims who are lured into the sex industry particularly via trafficking suffer from loss of national identity even names as perpetrators and pimps most of the time give them unheard of names or at worst, not a single one rendering them to sexual objects to be traded in which does not only barter their human value and dignity but occasioned open stigmatization and discrimination. In most cases (Nuttavuthisit, 2007) and (Neal, 2018) survivors of child sexual abuse and exploitation are label as ‘dirty workers’ warranting them being stigmatised and discriminated in all fronts more especially in the travel and tourism industry. Similarly, they stated, child-victims of sexual abuse are sometimes shunned by local government authorities, national programs, families, communities; and even schools because culturally they are believed to be spoiled and if allowed to mingle with other children they will infected them, (Ali, Haykal, & Youssef, 2021).

Some informants strongly observed that children lured into the sex trade for years are not only hard to stay with but almost impossible to properly bring up as their views of the

world and childhood are completely diverse and sometimes strange. “.....children in the TDA act like adults because.....they feel they know all the adults know.....i hope you know what I mean here.....plenty of them in the industry also spoil the name of the country.....as some destinations are unlawfully refer to as sex destinations driving away genuine and sometimes high spending tourists and businesses....that is a big punishment for any destination....” This dovetails well with (Sharma, Unnikrishnan, & Sharma, 2015), children in the travel and tourism industry have not only suffered physically, psychosocially but culturally as well since most of them have adopted new cultures, habits, and lifestyles that have not only dragged them out of their own culture but has made them aggressive making it hard to properly rear them that later resulted in horrible personalities. The children emulating the western cultures including dress style, haircuts, body piercing, tattoos; and blatant prostitution, has completely eroded their morals and norms for proper upbringing (Government, 2018). Similarly (Nuttavuthisit, 2007) and (Leong Chong, 2014) observed, the abuse and exploitation of children has not only resulted in national insecurity, conflict between communities and the tourism and travel industry, but has significantly jeopardized the image of many nations as they are sometimes labelled as ‘dirty and exploitative’ destinations.

IV. Summary and conclusion

In summary, the negative impacts of online child sexual abuse include psychological trauma, poor academic performance, mental disorders, drug abuse, diseases, stigma and discrimination, difficulties in the upbringing of children; and sanctions to the travel and hospitality industry.

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