**BOY-CHILD AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN NORTHEAST NIGERIA.**

**INTRODUCTION**

This report looks at the Northeast Nigerian context with Borno State been the case study. The report may not be data accurate as a reflection of Nigeria at large, but definitely an accurate report for the situation of Borno State, Nigeria and the Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (BAY) States.

The last few years has seen an increased effort from the government and non-governmental agencies in combatting the increase in sexual abuse of the vulnerable and at risk children and accessibility of these children for the same purpose. Governments have channeled many funds towards this fight in Nigeria with the Federal Government of Nigeria allocating millions of naira in budget to the National Agency for the Prevention of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) among other measures taken.

However, the cases of sexual abuses of children has not only risen alarmingly, but has taken a new dimension with the less pronounced child sexual abuse of female victims growing lesser in percentage than that of male children, with violators been mostly adult men of over 30 years old.

Many factors are responsible for the continuous rise in sexual exploitation of children in general and the rising cases of exploitation of male children.

The early marriage culture of the indigenous people has not only blurred the lines as far as sexual age for consent. ‘*If she can get married, she can have sex and if she is mentally prepared to bring up children’.* This has not only exposed children to sexual activities at a very tender age, but has also exposed them to unwanted attention from perpetrators, both preferential and situational offenders alike. Furthermore, the conflict in the Northeast especially in Borno State has given room for recruiters of child prostitutes to prosper, as poverty prevails and means of sustainable livelihood is almost absent ensuring true struggles for all who intend to adequately find daily feeding. Patrons/Matrons begin to recruit every person willing to make them some money in exchange the patrons/matrons provide the much-needed feeding opportunities and occasional ‘luxurious’ living through the glamour of material items. In Nigeria is still important due to the lack of cohesion between the three different legal systems and a legal loophole in the national constitution. In 2017, UNICEF reported that 48% of the girls were married before the age of 18 years old.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Superstitious beliefs and other spiritually related beliefs of prosperity and material wealth is another reason that the National Human Rights Commission Borno State Office has discovered in an unpublished report to be the reason for the alarming rise in the cases of male-child related sexual abuses in the State.

This report while commending the government of Borno State and the other BAY States for measures put in place in collaboration with the efforts of the Federal Government of Nigeria, encourages the innovation of newer approaches towards the reduction of sexually related offences involving minors, especially the alarming rate of male-child related sexual offences. The report has kept making reference to male-child related sexual exploitation as ‘alarming’ because the rise in number of such cases as recorded by the National Human Rights Commission in Borno State has reached a total of 15 cases in 2020 as compared to 2 in 2019 that is a 750% increase from the previous year, and these cases are only the ones reported.[[2]](#footnote-2) This paper shall discuss the reasons behind such rise in the male-child sexual exploitation, and recommend ways to bring it to the barest minimum.

**WHAT IS CAUSING THE ALARMING RISE IN MALE-CHILD SEXUAL EXPLOITATION IN THE NORTH EAST?**

The situation in Borno State is slightly peculiar and unique as most of the factors that encourages sexual abuse of boys are almost non-existent. There are two major things that are responsible for such rise in sexual abuses against boys in particular and children in general. These factors are mainly:

1. Superstitious and spiritual beliefs as to the sexual intercourse with minors of the male gender in a manner that is homosexual in nature, promotes the perpetrator’s prosperity and places such perpetrator on a path to material wealth and prosperity. This superstition has been found through surveys carried out by the National Human Rights Commission, to be the leading cause of boy-child sexual abuses in Borno State and most of the Northeast Nigeria. The belief that a person gains youthfulness from having sexual intercourse with minors, is also one of the superstitions that fuels the sexual abuse of both boy and girl child in the Northeast.
2. Sexual deprivation/high usage of sexual enhancement drugs is also responsible for the increase in cases of sexual abuse of children. Drug usage in the Northeast (Borno State in particular) is at the peak of its prosperity right now, despite the efforts of the NDLEA (National Drugs Law Enforcement Agency) to curtail drug proliferation. The NDLEA has good policies and action plans in place but the lack of proper funding and poor man power force has left the NDLEA chasing shadows, only making meager breakthrough and the major drug suppliers continue to thrive and the demand keeps skyrocketing. The demand for sexual enhancement drugs and the supply thereof in Borno State is a topic that has been trending in policy makers circle but no definitive policy stand has been taken to curtail the proliferation of such drugs, thereby allowing users of such drugs almost easy access to these drugs. The growing usage of such drugs has led to the growth of sexual abuses against children both male and female alike, as users who are sexually depraved after such usage resort seeking sexual relieve wherever they can find. In most cases children who are vulnerable and soft targets, easy to convince and financially affordable (in cases where money is involved – most cases there is no financial or other material benefit for the victim).
3. The vulnerable Children Associated with Armed Forces and Armed Groups (CAAFAGs), Almajiri children in tsangaya Islamic schools, children with disabilities, Unaccompanied and Separated Children (UASC) most especially the male children in Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) camps and host communities. The humanitarian crisis in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe (BAY) States give rise to this vulnerability and at risk of increasing population of children without child protection and going through severe human rights violations and child abuses by people in position of power. The inadequate comprehensive child protection services for these marginalized groups of children especially in host communities render them soft victims of trafficking for forced labor, domestic servitude, sexual exploitation and slavery. While the Organized Armed Groups (OAGs) abduct these vulnerable children, forcefully recruit and use them as child soldiers and/or suicide bombers.

The factors briefly discussed above are in no way the sole reasons for the rise in this case, as one cannot ignore psychiatric and psychological reasons like pedophilia and other conditions that lead perpetrators to becoming preferential sexual abusers of children.[[3]](#footnote-3)

There has been no identified or reported cases of boy-child prostitution in Borno State thus far, and no indication as to the demand of male-child prostitutes thereby leading to the conclusion that there is no structured demand and supply network of boy-child prostitution services as there are for girl-child prostitution services. Most perpetrators take advantage of the vulnerability of the children by either physically forcing the child against such child’s will or enticing such a child with promises and or ‘goodies.’ Regardless of the method or means used to sexually abuse a child, threats are usually the preferred means of making such victim to keep quiet and not report the matter to either parents or authorities or anyone for that matter.

The insurgency plays a significant but indirect role in this trend. With communities destroyed, wealth and its sources destroyed and persons plunged into uncertainty as to where the next meal will come from, and the hassle of living in camps and host communities, many would do anything to acquire wealth at any means necessary to escape the hardships associated with the life of an IDP. The idea of wealth becomes more appealing with every hard day, until children become the target and exploitation happens.

**CURRENT RESPONSE:**

Majority of the cases referred to in this report are those that emanated from the National Human Rights Commission. Most of the cases received have been referred to other agencies like the Nigeria Police Force and or NAPTIP for investigation and prosecution. For those still under investigation, the Commission keeps close eyes on the development of the investigations and for those in court, the Commission watches briefs for a number of those cases.

So far, the response against sexual exploitation as regarding children is not coordinated and relies heavily on referrals for specific services and with the doctrine of confidentiality heavily in place, relevant agencies are always unable to get a complete picture of the situation and as such the response is always weak.

The organizations with the funding to respond to the challenge lack the legal power to do so, the organizations with the legal power to respond, lack the funding to do so, leading to an ever circle of ‘hit and miss’ kind of response as neither category of the organizations is adequately able to respond, hence the need for a coordinated approach, where legal power and funds are combined to make a decisive stand.

In addition, the response so far is girl-child centered. Women and girl-child are given more attention such that the male victims are almost totally neglected. Within the GBV spectrum, this bias is so pronounced that once GBV is mentioned the female gender comes to mind as victims, and mostly never as the perpetrators. This is probably due to the prejudicial belief that men cannot fall victims of GBV.[[4]](#footnote-4) This bias as to gender in GBV has also trickled down to the Child Protection Spectrum, which pays more attention to the girl-child than it does the male child. This could be seen from the numerous organizations we have within the Northeast focusing on the girl child and almost zero focusing on the male child.[[5]](#footnote-5)

With this situation, the perpetrators of sexual exploitation against particularly male children are finding it easier to escape scrutiny and ultimately get away with such exploitation because there is less attention placed on the male child.

Until there is a revisit of the definition of child protection to address the peculiar cultural and traditional bias against gender, forces will continue to hijack these movements and turn it into gender liberation movements which in turn gives a one-sided approach to both GBV and Child Protection.

**RECOMMENDATIONS:**

1. The domestication of the Child’s Right Act (CRA) in the Northeast States of Borno, Adamawa and Yobe.
2. A unified and coordinated approach towards curtailing increase in cases of sexual exploitation of children in general as opposed to multiple front assault approach on eradication.
3. A holistic approach in combatting sexual abuse/exploitation of children in general as opposed to a focus on the girl-child or male-child. That is to say, the response should be designed in a manner that seeks to protect children as a whole without focusing on a particular group based on their gender. Gender should only come into play only when thinking of interventions that require attention to gender of victims.
4. The Coordinating agencies (should recommendation 1 be implemented) should develop and execute programmes aimed at reorienting and reeducating communities as to the ills of holding unto such harmful superstitions that forces humanity in the long run to deviate from its humanity. These programmes should be designed as a long-term plan with the aim of urging communities to abandon the harmful superstitions that wealth, prosperity and goodwill comes from sexually exploiting children, especially boys.
5. A central database should be formed for the Northeast response, to contain data and information of all offenders and victims. This database will ensure adequate and proper tracking of offenders and their ties, and to keep records of victims and the response they receive. The database will also enhance the coordinating agencies to maintain an updated statistic to monitor the progress of such coordination and make adequate adjustment in the fight against sexual exploitation of children in the North East.
6. Recruitment of Informants within the communities will ensure that prompt, adequate, and accurate information as to sexual exploitation of children or possible exploitation, is reported to the Coordinating agencies for proper, adequate and prompt response to protect children.
7. A Unified Fund (UF) should be established for the Response Coordinating Agencies to contribute certain amounts of monies at certain times that will be agreed by members of such coordinating bodies. This fund is meant to help fund information buying from informants, research, and aiding of victims among other needs of the coordinating agencies.
8. Should recommendation 1 be implemented, permanent members are to be nominated by member agencies based on competency, with replacement of such members adhering to certain rules of conduct like approval from other members of any replacement. This recommendation is geared toward ensuring proper information management of the coordinating agencies and to avoid information leaks that comes with members not been permanent members.

**CONCLUSION:**

The problem still remains the same, that its children are still exposed to dangers and exploitation that put them at risk of not enjoying a blissful adult life, meaningful and acceptable within the confines of the values standards established by society. It is however the dynamics of this problem that is changing at a pace that is so alarming, new methods to the same madness are employed, which calls for a concerted effort of all partners to bring about new strategy.

The working definition of vulnerability as far as sexual exploitation is concerned, has been pushed to its limit such that a clearer definition that addresses the current challenges is needed. Children have always been classified as vulnerable, with the girl child enjoying an elevated priority as to protection of the vulnerable. With recent development, the prioritization formula needs to therefore change from gender based related threats, and a holistic approach to protection of children from sexual exploitation in general be employed.

It is important to also help communities understand rather than just informing them of the ills of such actions, and the need for sexual offenders to be reported and punished within the confines of law; and also the need to not discriminate against victims but instead provide proper and adequate support, for a healthier society needs strong survivors.

I sincerely believe that with the adoption of the recommendations above, significant strides shall be recorded in curtailing sexual abuses against children.

1. Universal periodical on the review of sexual exploitation against children in Nigeria 2018: <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.ecpat.org/universal-periodical-review-sexual-exploitation-of-children-nigeria/&sa=U&ved=2ahUKEwjAyqnDtqXwAhUN4OAKHWAuD_cQFjAAegQIBBAC&usg=AOvVaw2dIadrsKp7ypkxlBRtSTIU> accessed 28th April, 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The people of Borno State have a culture of silence when it comes to reporting of sexual abuse and or offences as they often see it as a shameful thing to be exposed. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Understanding demand for CSEC and the related gender dimensions: A review of the research July 2013 <http://www.ecpat.net/WorldCongressIII/PDF/Publications/SexualExploitation-July30.pdf> accessed on the 25th April, 2021 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. As at the time of writing this report, there is actually no known organization that focuses on the male child particularly, while there are about seven known organizations with service designed to focus on the girl child. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)