# Prostitution among Female Students in Selected Universities in the Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria as a Social Problem and Ways to Curb the Menace

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the potential factors that impact the involvement of female university students in prostitution in some selected Niger-Delta Region's universities and as well provide solution to the menace. A longitudinal research approach was utilized to systematically gather the desired data over a predetermined period. A sample group of 35 female university students was selected through snowball sampling to acquire the necessary information and data. By utilizing a semi-structured interview guide, data was collected and

subsequently analyzed using qualitative methods. The analysis focused on the participants' quotes obtained during the study. The findings from this analysis shed light on the various influential factors that contribute to the involvement of female university students in prostitution. The factors that emerged as influential contributors to female university students' engagement in prostitution encompass peer group influence, compulsive sexual behaviour, and the pursuit of satisfaction amid personal inadequacies, seeking revenge following relationship breakups or contracting sexual transmitted diseases (STDs), and developing a sense of unworthiness due to repeated disappointments. These diverse life experiences and psycho-emotional conditions ultimately led the female university students in Niger-Delta Region to involve themselves in prostitution. In order to address these situations, it is imperative to provide support and assistance to individuals involved in prostitution, aiming to prevent further complications. This can be achieved through the provision of psychotherapies, counselling services, and psycho-educational sessions that raise awareness about the risks and detrimental effects associated with prostitution. Furthermore, it is important to incorporate teachings on problem-solving and crisis intervention techniques, equipping individuals with skills to navigate through difficulties and challenges, including financial issues. By doing so, they can explore alternative avenues for finding solutions rather than resorting to prostitution

**Keywords***: Female University Students; Prostitution; Prostitutes; Sexual Affairs and Activities*

## Introduction

Prostitution can be defined as the act or practice of engaging in sexual activities in exchange for money, goods, or other forms of compensation. It involves individuals, often referred to as sex workers, offering sexual services to clients, typically in exchange for payment. The historical roots of prostitution can be traced back to ancient practices in which sexual services were exchanged for financial remuneration (Sanger, 2015). These early instances of prostitution were often embedded within secular rituals and cultural customs. Additional research has revealed that prostitution was prevalent within the temples of ancient Babylon and was not perceived as unethical. This particular aspect resulted in its

recognition as a publicly accepted and legal practice. Babylonian women were obligated to engage in paid sexual transactions with foreigners as a prerequisite before carrying out sacred duties and responsibilities (Dufour, 1902). During the period around 260 BC, in locations such as Ancient Greece and Rome, prostitution gained public and legal recognition as a formalized business entity. This recognition included the establishment of dedicated offices for prostitutes and the adoption of distinctive attire, such as the wearing of "red bows" on their arms. Furthermore, individuals involved in prostitution were classified as sex workers and were required to fulfil tax obligations since their services were exchanged for monetary compensation (Sanger, 2015).

During the period documented in the New Testament, as recorded in the Holy Scriptures, historical evidence suggests the existence of prostitution. Several biblical texts refer to figures such as Mary Magdalene, who was associated with the city of Magdala and identified as a female prostitute. Magdala, situated on the shores of Lake Gennesaret, approximately four miles north of Tiberias, held historical significance as a residential city for Hasmonean leaders and was known for frequent uprisings within the community. Additionally, Magdala's strategic geographic location facilitated trade routes between Rome and its colonized territories, attracting numerous businessmen capable of providing financial compensation to women for sexual services. Cassius, in particular, utilized Magdala as a residence for those he had enslaved, further contributing to the dynamics of prostitution in the region. The prevailing societal view in Rome and other regions, which considered women as inferior to men, contributed to the acceptance of prostitution as a legitimate practice. Consequently, many women, including Mary Magdalene, were influenced to participate in prostitution due to these circumstances and cultural norms (Brown, 1992; Ricci, 1994).

Prostitution, under legal frameworks, persisted as a recognized business and practice for many centuries. Its longevity coincided with the development of erotic industries that encompassed various sexual activities and behaviours. By the 19th Century, prostitution had become prevalent in regions such as the USA and Europe, with its prevalence often linked to the presence of establishments like bawdy houses and brothels (D'Emilio and Freedman, 1988). In cities like Paris and London, the profession of prostitution thrived due to the training provided to

prostitutes, enabling them to work as skilled professionals (Roberts, 1992). Furthermore, within African nations such as Gambia, the prevalence of prostitution has risen as a consequence of the establishment and accessibility of alcohol-serving establishments, such as bars, that are often accompanied by guest houses or lodges in their vicinity (Pickering, Todd, Dunn, Pbpin & Wilkins, 1992). Consequently, approximately 90% of individuals engaged in prostitution are women, with the remaining 10% being men (McGuire & Gruter, 2003).

During the 20th Century, the prostitution market expanded to include veterans and military officials. For example, during World War I and World War II, prostitutes provided their services to veterans and military personnel (Head, 2009). Additionally, during the Japanese war, approximately 200,000 women, known as comfort women, were recruited from China and Korea to serve as prostitutes for soldiers and veterans. The selection process for those deemed suitable for prostitution services involved various criteria, including factors such as facial attractiveness, age, breast size, body mass index, and overall health (Buss and Schmitt, 1993; Prokop et al., 2018; Sohn, 2016).

Subsequently, by the late 20th Century, prostitution underwent a significant transformation as it was no longer regarded as a legitimate or legal business practice. Factors such as the rise in venereal and sexually transmitted infections, notably syphilis, played a crucial role in its prohibition (Adriaenssens and Hendrickx, 2012). Furthermore, due to the significant negative consequences associated with prostitution, including condemnation, violence, and the deterioration of individuals' well-being, there was a vigorous campaign against its existence. For instance, in European countries, four nation’s outright banned prostitution, while in another 16 countries, it remained illegal despite its persistence (Danna, 2014).

Presently, the phenomenon of prostitution in Africa exhibits variations among different countries. Due to its negative consequences, many nations do not recognize it as a legitimate or formal practice, despite it serving as a means of livelihood for some individuals. Numerous studies have highlighted poverty as a significant driver for women's involvement in prostitution. Ampofo (2001) supports this assertion, stating that the lack of economic and financial support

from close associates such as partners and family members compels women to resort to prostitution. Furthermore, macroeconomic shifts and economic constraints contribute to the increasing number of women working as prostitutes (Ampofo, 2001). In certain regions, individuals have chosen to engage in prostitution as a result of the closure of their business enterprises, leading to persistent financial hardships (Chakwe, 2005). Additionally, for those who are still pursuing education in secondary schools, colleges, and universities, they may be compelled to turn to prostitution in order to generate funds for covering tuition fees and other expenses (Sibanda, 2003).

Efforts to combat the persisting prevalence of prostitution have been made through various measures aimed at its prohibition. For example, in countries like Nigeria, the government has launched anti-prostitution campaigns and enacted stringent anti-prostitution legislation, resulting in heavy fines and imprisonment sentences ranging from 2 to 10 years. This approach is driven by the perception of prostitution as an anti-cultural phenomenon (Ibewuike, 2000; Oladipupo, 2002). Similarly, in 2005, in Migina-Remera District, Rwanda, national police forces and local leaders successfully eradicated and prohibited the activities of over 100 prostitutes (Sabiti, 2005). Furthermore, ongoing sexual and public health campaigns have aimed to discourage individuals from engaging in multiple sexual partners or extramarital affairs due to the risks of incurable sexually transmitted infections like HIV/AIDS.

Despite the various measures implemented to prohibit and eradicate prostitution, it remains prevalent within our communities. Disturbingly, the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC), as reported by Kamala et al. (2001), reveals that even children are involved in prostitution. This takes the form of commercial sexual exploitation, where children are sent by their caregivers to work as prostitutes in order to generate income. Additionally, peer influence plays a significant role in their engagement in prostitution. Furthermore, cultures that practice initiation ceremonies contribute to the inclination towards prostitution, as these ceremonies impart knowledge on how to manage households and navigate relationships with the opposite sex during their formative years. Finally, the issue of single parenting, which often leads to child abuse and mistreatment, has driven many children to flee their homes and turn to

prostitution as a means of survival (Kamala et al., 2001). Moreover, within the realm of higher education, there are notable instances of prostitution among female university students. A study conducted by Gbagbo & Gbagbo (2021) in Accra, Kumasi, Cape Coast, and Winneba sheds light on this phenomenon, revealing a significant number of female university students involved in prostitution. These students predominantly engage in prostitution within their hostels, brothels located on the streets, or rented accommodations such as hotels and guest houses. They often leave their contact information and pictures to receive appointments, whether on a paid or unpaid basis. Consequently, this study aims to investigate the factors influencing female university students to engage in prostitution, as there remains a pressing need to understand the underlying reasons that drive them to pursue this path despite existing prohibition measures.

## Research Method

### Research Design

This study utilized a non-experimental longitudinal research design, which was chosen for its ability to collect data at multiple time points. This design is advantageous as it enables the researcher(s) to gather both quantitative and qualitative data/information. Additionally, it allows the researcher(s) to obtain insights from individuals who have first-hand experience related to the study topic. This facilitates a dynamic relationship between the researcher(s) and the respondents, contributing to the study's overall conclusions (Caruana, Roman, Hernández-Sánchez & Solli, 2015).

### Area of Study

This study was conducted in some selected universities in Niger – Delta Region of Nigeria. The selection of this area was based on several reasons. Firstly, the region is known for its high prevalence of sexually transmitted infections/diseases such as HIV/AIDS, which may be associated with behaviours like prostitution. Secondly, the researcher had personal connections with potential respondents in this area, particularly female university students from the University of Port Harcourt Choba, Federal University of Petroleum Resources Effurun, Niger-Delta University Yenagoa Bayelsa. These students openly identified themselves as commercial sex workers/prostitutes in the presence of the researcher, making them valuable participants for the study.

**Population and Sample size**

The study population consisted of 35 female university students from the University of Port Harcourt Choba, Federal University of Petroleum Resources Effurun, Niger-Delta University Yenagoa Bayelsa, all of whom were working as commercial sex workers/prostitutes. The sample size was obtained using non-probability sampling, specifically the snowball sampling technique as described by Sedgwick (2013). The use of snowball sampling was justified by the sensitivity of the topic under study and the need for careful recruitment of participants. The technique allowed the researchers to initially identify two female students who openly identified themselves as commercial sex workers/prostitutes, and then subsequent participants were recruited through referrals from the initial participants. This exponential discriminative snowball sampling approach ensured that respondents were selected from a diverse range of sources, based on the criteria relevant to the study.

**Data Collection and Instrumentation**

In this study, data collection was carried out using a semi-structured interview guide. The interview guide contained carefully crafted questions that facilitated the collection of relevant information from the respondents. The use of a semi-structured interview guide was deemed appropriate for this study due to its ability to foster a dialogue between the researcher and the respondents, enabling the exploration of the "why" and "how" aspects of the information being sought. Additionally, the semi-structured format allowed the researchers to ask both closed-ended and open-ended questions, thus enabling the collection of both specific and in-depth information from the respondents. This approach to data collection aligns with the principles outlined by Newcomer, Hatry, and Wholey (2015, p.492-493) regarding the use of semi-structured interviews for obtaining direct and comprehensive insights from participants.

**Ethical Consideration**

Throughout the study, the researcher adhered to various ethical considerations including confidentiality, informed consent, safety and integrity, and copyright. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher took measures to protect the identities of the respondents by using pseudonyms instead of their real names. Prior to data collection, the researcher provided the respondents with clear information about

the study and obtained their voluntary consent to participate. The safety and integrity of the respondents were also prioritized, and a secure environment was created to make them feel comfortable and secure during the study.

In terms of copyright issues, the researcher took careful measures when quoting or citing external sources. The borrowed concepts and information were appropriately referenced, ensuring proper attribution and acknowledgment of the original authors. These ethical considerations were meticulously followed to maintain the integrity of the study and uphold the rights and well-being of the participants.

**Finding and Discussion**

Based on the research conducted by Mgbako & Smith (2011), there are numerous factors that contribute to women entering into prostitution. These reasons vary among individuals and are often influenced by their unique historical backgrounds. This section aims to present a comprehensive collection of opinions, testimonies, and experiences obtained directly from the respondents during the study. The findings and results gathered effectively address the primary objective of the research, which was to examine the potential factors influencing university students to engage in prostitution, specifically within the Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria. To ensure coherence and consistency, the authors have organized the results into distinct subsections and provided a thorough discussion for each, highlighting similarities in the responses and making appropriate generalizations. The following subsections outline the obtained results and provide detailed explanations of their implications.

**Experiencing a decline in self-value as a consequence of successive relationship breakups**

In relation to this observation, a group of over ten participants actively acknowledged it as a significant contributing factor that propelled their entry into prostitution. By examining their previous engagements in committed relationships, the majority of respondents expressed dissatisfaction and emotional distress resulting from the dissolution of such unions. These breakups induced feelings of being unloved, unattractive, undesirable, and unworthy, particularly when experienced within the context of committed betrothed relationships.

Drawing upon their personal experiences, the participants openly expressed their perspective, stating, "It is not that we willingly choose to engage in prostitution, but rather due to the repeated failures in our committed relationships, we have come to question the feasibility of pursuing such relationships. Instead, we have found solace in the companionship of friends who may provide us with the sexual satisfaction we seek when needed." This sentiment aligns with the findings of Rhoades et al. (2011), who posits that the breakdown of relationships often instills a sense of fear within individuals, leading to dissatisfaction when entering new relationships. Over time, this fear and dissatisfaction may erode one's self-worth, ultimately deterring them from seeking further commitments and prompting the development of various defense mechanisms as a form of compensation.

Furthermore, if appropriate intervention is not provided in a timely manner, individuals may be susceptible to the emergence of brief psychotic disorders characterized by hallucinations and delusions, which involve the misinterpretation of sensory perceptions. These disorders can lead individuals to perceive things, events, objects, and people in an inappropriate or distorted manner. In the absence of intervention, individuals may experience intense emotional distress, profound confusion, rapid mood swings, impaired judgment, and neglect of basic hygiene practices (APA, 2013).

Consequently, individuals who have undergone multiple relationship breakups and progress to this stage may ultimately devalue themselves and lose their sense of equilibrium. This disintegration of self-worth and stability may then contribute to the adoption and engagement in behaviours such as prostitution.

**A vengeful mindset after suffering a great deal of grief**

Following the accumulation of significant hardships, individuals may develop a vengeful mindset as a response to their prolonged suffering. This mentality arises from a deep-seated desire to seek retribution against those who have caused them pain. It represents a psychological defense mechanism that aims to restore a sense of justice or balance in their lives.

The emergence of a revenge-driven mentality can be attributed to the individual's desire to regain a sense of control and power, particularly in the face of perceived

injustices. Research conducted by Smith et al. (2018) supports this perspective, highlighting how individuals who have endured repeated emotional trauma may adopt a vengeful mindset as a coping mechanism.

The vengeful mindset can manifest in various behaviours, ranging from subtle acts of manipulation to more overt displays of aggression, depending on the individual's personality traits, circumstances, and specific experiences of pain. In essence, the mentality of revenge serves as a psychological response to the accumulation of hardships, as individuals attempt to assert their agency and seek redress for the suffering they have endured.

**Obtaining Satisfaction Due to Inadequacies**

Achieving satisfaction as a result of perceived insufficiencies is a phenomenon that can be observed in individuals. This occurs when individuals experience a sense of fulfilment or contentment by compensating for their perceived lack or inadequacy in certain aspects of their lives. The pursuit of satisfaction in the face of insufficiencies is rooted in a complex interplay of psychological and motivational factors. According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943), individuals strive to fulfil various needs, such as physiological, safety, love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. When certain needs are not adequately met, individuals may engage in behaviours aimed at compensating for these insufficiencies, ultimately seeking satisfaction.

Research conducted by Johnson and Smith (2017) supports this notion, suggesting that individuals may resort to alternative means to fulfil unmet needs and alleviate the associated discontent. These means can vary widely, ranging from material acquisitions to engaging in certain activities or adopting specific lifestyles.

The attainment of satisfaction through compensatory measures can serve as a temporary source of gratification, providing individuals with a sense of relief or contentment. However, it is important to note that these compensatory behaviours may not address the underlying causes of insufficiencies and may only offer transient fulfilment.

In conclusion, the pursuit of satisfaction in response to perceived insufficiencies involves individuals engaging in compensatory behaviours to fulfil unmet needs. While these behaviours can provide temporary gratification, it is crucial to recognize the need for comprehensive approaches that address the root causes of these insufficiencies to achieve sustained and genuine satisfaction.

**I won't die alone Mantra**

The slogan highlights the existential fear of dying alone, which is deeply rooted in human nature and the need for social connection and belonging. It signifies the longing for emotional support, companionship, and the assurance of leaving a lasting impact on others.

This point is intricately connected to how the respondents acquired incurable disease like HIV/AIDS from their sexual partners. They perceive this aspect as unjust, questioning the fairness of the world. In the midst of blaming themselves, they expressed their thoughts, stating: "Our unconditional love for unfaithful sexual partners has led us to live a life devoid of hope, contemplating the possibility of dying at any moment due to an incurable disease. If we had been more cautious, we wouldn't be in this dire situation. Five female respondents further revealed, "Blinded by love, we overlooked health concerns and engaged in a relationship with a man without knowledge of his HIV/AIDS status." These burdens have become overwhelmingly heavy for them to bear, as they grapple with accepting their health status while facing the constant fear of impending death. To exacerbate matters, they have made the decision to intentionally transmit the virus to other men through sexual encounters, in an attempt to shorten their lives through the affliction of HIV/AIDS. Engaging in prostitution is seen as one method of fulfilling this desire.

The sentiments expressed by the respondents highlight the psychological and emotional turmoil they experience as a result of their HIV/AIDS diagnosis. It illustrates the complex interplay between feelings of guilt, anger, hopelessness, and the desire for revenge. The decisions they make, such as engaging in risky behaviours and deliberately spreading the virus, reveal the depths of despair and a distorted sense of control over their own lives.

These narratives shed light on the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals living with HIV/AIDS, including the psychological impact of the disease, the social stigma attached to it, and the profound implications it has on their personal relationships and self-perception. Understanding these experiences can inform interventions and support strategies aimed at addressing the holistic needs of those affected by HIV/AIDS.

Engaging in such a decision and practice deviates from normal behaviour and is classified as a "Conduct Disorder" due to its intention to violate the rights of others and place innocent individuals at risk of physical harm. According to the American Psychiatric Association (APA, 2013, p. 470), this conduct disorder is associated with various forms of sexual misconduct, such as sexual assaults, harassment, rape, and engaging in manipulative sexual behaviours. Therefore, even individuals who purposefully aim to transmit HIV/AIDS to uninfected individuals through prostitution can be considered as exhibiting symptoms of this disorder.

**Compulsive Sexual Behaviour**

Compulsive sexual behaviour also referred to as sexual addiction or hyper sexuality, is a controversial and complex condition characterized by an excessive and uncontrollable preoccupation with sexual thoughts, fantasies, or behaviours. Individuals with sexual addiction may engage in various forms of sexual behaviours, including excessive pornography consumption, frequent masturbation, engaging in multiple casual or anonymous sexual encounters, engaging in risky sexual behaviours, or spending excessive time and energy pursuing sexual activities to the detriment of other important aspects of life.

Following in-depth interviews with respondents, the researcher discovered that sexual addiction drives female university students to engage in prostitution. This is demonstrated by Respondents statements: “When I'm not having sex, I'm always uncomfortable”. If a week goes by without having sexual intercourse, I typically feel inadequate and dissatisfied, unless it is during my menstruation period. Respondent went on to claim, "Such an aspect has made me always look after men (whether on a paid or unpaid basis), so that I may get sexual gratification." Goodman (1998, p.140) explains why such a component occurs as a

result of an individual's poor self-regulatory mechanism, the more an individual engages in sexual activities, the more he or she is unable to abandon them. At the end of the day, a human develops a maladaptive behaviour that cannot be controlled or reduced owing to tolerance and withdrawals from sexual cravings. Furthermore, the availability of sexual and erotic materials that enable individuals to engage in sexual activities has led to the development of sexual addiction following regular practices. All of this has eventually led to female university students engaging in prostitution, thereby having sexual connections with more than one man while engaging in sexual activities with them on a regular basis (Birchard 2011).

**Peer Group Influence**

Peer group influence can play a significant role in individuals' involvement in prostitution. Peer group pressure refers to the influence exerted by peers, such as friends, acquaintances, or social groups that can affect a person's attitudes, behaviours, and decisions. In the context of prostitution, peer group influence can contribute to an individual's entry into or continuation of sex work.

With this component, respondents appear to engage in prostitution as a result of the influence of their friends and relatives. It all relies on what is spoken, displayed, revealed, or told about the incentives that prostitutes obtain as a result of their prostitution. Most people who are encouraged to engage in prostitution have insufficiencies that are accompanied by the need to meet some personal requirements such as buying costly apparel, utilizing expensive technical instruments, living is an expensive and beautiful apartment, and so on. And if an individual obtains them after engaging in sexual relationships with men (prostitution), her friends may be tempted to do the same in order to meet the same demands or wishes.

Furthermore, regular parties or ceremonies hosted by friends, or regular visits to recreational centers like as night pubs, have led students to frequently drink and eventually engage in sexual activities with various men, this causes others to perceive them as prostitutes. As a result, the more they visit nightclubs (when inebriated), the more they are encouraged to engage in sexual behaviours with various males. Okafor and Duru 2010; Gbagbo and Gbagbo 2021)

## Conclusion

The prevalence of prostitution among female university students appears to be continuously increasing due to various contributing factors and this has become a social problem in our society, especially in the Niger-Delta Region of Nigeria. These factors include peer group influence, compulsive sexual behaviour, obtaining satisfaction due to inadequacies, experiencing a decline in self-value as a consequence of successive relationship breakups or contracting sexual transmitted diseases (STDs), and developing feelings of unworthiness following a series of disappointments.

Furthermore, due to a variety of life experiences and psycho-emotional conditions, some female university students have developed an unhealthy behavioural pattern referred to as "prostitution." They engage in this behaviour without taking into account the health implications or cultural norms of their societies. Consequently, those involved in prostitution are often stigmatized as unethical and impure, leading to a lack of respect and esteem in their lives.

## Recommendations

The mitigation of prostitution among female university students necessitates the implementation of comprehensive strategies, methodologies, and professional interventions to address and rectify this maladaptive behaviour. In this regard, universities play a crucial role in identifying and monitoring students engaged in prostitution, while concurrently devising targeted assistance programs for those identified. Such interventions could encompass the provision of psychotherapeutic and counselling services, aimed at fostering cognitive and behavioural transformations, thereby facilitating the process of rehabilitation and reintegration into society.

Moreover, the retention of psycho-educational initiatives is of paramount importance, as it serves to enlighten female university students about the inherent dangers and adverse consequences associated with engaging in prostitution which is seen as a social problem in the society. Furthermore, the inclusion of pertinent topics pertaining to interpersonal relationships, problem-solving, and crisis intervention techniques within the university curriculum is imperative. Equipping students with such knowledge and skills is intended to foster their ability to cope

with insufficiencies and challenges in a manner that does not resort to prostitution as a coping mechanism.

Lastly, it is incumbent upon parents or caregivers to fulfil their financial responsibilities by providing essential and basic necessities to their female university student offspring. By meeting these needs adequately, the likelihood of female students being enticed or compelled to turn to prostitution for the sake of financial support is significantly diminished. This preventive approach may effectively serve to curb the prevalence of prostitution among female university students.

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