**Beyond Governance and Family: Uncovering the Root Drivers of Underage Prostitution in Nigerian Contemporary Societies**

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**Abstract**

*Underage prostitution is a growing social concern with profound implications for human development, yet explanations often reduce it to governance failures or family dysfunction. While these factors are important, they do not fully account for the complex realities that push adolescents into prostitution. This study adopts a mixed-methods design across five urban and peri-urban locations in Nigeria (Abuja, Lagos, Jos, Makurdi, and Port Harcourt) using 370 questionnaires, 37 in-depth interviews, and five focus group discussions. A triangulation revealed that beyond weak governance and family breakdown, underage prostitution is increasingly shaped by poor sexual health education, quick-wealth aspirations, peer coercion, rebellion against restrictive norms, and in some cases, the normalisation of prostitution as freedom or a legitimate livelihood, particularly among illiterate youths exposed to crime early. The findings call for multi-layered interventions that strengthen education, enhance institutional accountability, and provide youth-centred social support systems.*

**Keywords**

Underage prostitution, governance failure, family dysfunction, peer influence, sex education, sexual exploitation

**Introduction:**

The growing involvement of children and teenagers in commercial sexual activities remains one of the most urgent social and human rights issues of our time. Despite legal frameworks and international protocols aimed at protecting children and teenagers, this phenomenon persists. (ECPAT,2025). In countries such as Nigeria, underage prostitution has become more socially normalised, especially in urban centres and border towns where law enforcement is inconsistent and economic hardship is widespread. Traditional analyses often attribute this crisis to poor governance, economic distress, and family breakdown, suggesting that corruption, poverty, and inadequate parental guidance are among the main causes (Banka & Chamaria, 2020).

Governance failures in Nigeria, such as weak enforcement of child protection laws, limited investment in youth development, and widespread corruption, create environments where exploitation is rarely punished and often goes unnoticed (Willie-Nwobu, 2024; Joshua, 2022). Increasingly, underage prostitution is driven not only by the absence of protections but also by distorted incentives, lack of sex education, weak institutional support, and harmful cultural currents (Omoniyi & Adewusi, 2022).

Among these emerging factors, inadequate sex education is one of them. Conversations about sexuality are often cloaked in shame, silence, or religious dogma, leaving children and teenagers to rely on misinformation from their peers, the internet, or exploitative adults.

On social media platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook, influencers are seen to frequently promote hyper-sexualised content (Soriano-Ayala, Bonillo & Cala, 2022; van Oosten, 2021), turning what was once taboo into now a growing and acceptable aspiration. This scenario reflects a wider pattern of poor socialisation. Peer pressure acts as an unseen force, pushing them toward risky behaviour in pursuit of acceptance or survival. Unfortunately, schools that are meant to be safe spaces often fail to address these issues (Omoniyi & Adewusi, 2022; Bello & Jamilu, 2016; Choji, 2013).

A particularly sensitive but essential factor is the rebellion against traditional norms (Lawal et al., 2021; Adigeb & Anake, 2014), especially those perceived as repressive or hypocritical. While the aspects of family and the state still matter in any form of discussion on underage prostitution, this paper contends that the current increase in the phenomenon cannot be explained solely by governance failures or familial neglect. Using Nigeria as a case study, the paper examines how deeper cultural and psychosocial dynamics contribute to the underage prostitution crisis.

**Literature Review**

Numerous studies across Africa, Southeast Asia and globally associate underage prostitution with systemic governance failures. Poor institutional oversight, weak social protection systems and the absence of child-sensitive urban planning have all contributed to an environment where children can be easily exploited. In Nigeria, for instance, governance failure manifests in underfunded educational systems, youth unemployment and a corrupt justice apparatus that rarely protects minors from exploitation (Raphael et al., 2025). Research in urban Lagos has highlighted the ineffectiveness of government agencies meant to safeguard child welfare, allowing traffickers and exploiters to operate with impunity (Daibu, 2023; Folami et al., 2018). In Malaysia, literature documents a rise in child prostitution in urban centres such as Kuala Lumpur and Johor Bahru, driven in part by lax law enforcement and an inability to regulate informal settlements and entertainment industries (Kamaruddin & Mohd,Zin, 2022).

. In many Nigerian cities, studies show that young girls who lack parental presence or suffer from emotionally unavailable caregivers are more likely to be lured by deceptive promises of financial stability or material gain (Omoniyi & Adewusi, 2022). In Malawi, India, and the Philippines, similar patterns have been observed. Families in economic distress may ignore transactional relationships involving their teenaged daughters, or in extreme cases, facilitate such relationships themselves (Dubey et al., 2022; Jennings, 2020; Nkhoma & Charnley, 2018). his distortion of family roles highlights how economic survival and moral compromise are increasingly linked in under regulated environments.

The near absence of targeted sex education in many developing societies appears as one of the contributing factors according to Ghadirian et al., (2023) and Wangamati, (2020). In Nigeria, school-based sex education is either underdeveloped or out rightly resisted on cultural and religious grounds. Empirical studies indicate that ignorance and lack of high-quality, age-appropriate sexuality and relationship education significantly contribute to the increase of vulnerability to sexual exploitation (UNESCO, 2024).

The quick wealth syndrome, which is the desire to acquire material possessions rapidly, is seen to become a significant factor driving underage prostitution in modern societies. Encouraged by globalised media and local celebrity culture, many adolescents believe that financial success is both immediate and essential for social acceptance. In Nigeria, social media platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have popularised lifestyles that highlight luxury, travel, and designer fashion, often without proper context or caution. When combined with unemployment and limited educational opportunities, the allure of transactional relationships as a shortcut to wealth becomes very appealing (Sule et al., 2023).

Besides that, socialisation deficits also play a critical role. In communities where dysfunctional norms are prevalent, such as glorification of “runs girls,” “slay queens”, or “side hustles”, young girls are likely to imitate behaviour patterns that promise social currency and survival. According to Ulo (2024) and Omoniyi (2022), poor neighbourhood social cohesion in Nigerian urban centres fosters environments where deviant behaviour is normalised and even rewarded. In Malaysia, research has shown that adolescents from low-income urban areas are more susceptible to peer-induced risky behaviour, particularly when parental supervision is weak (Rahman et al., 2021).

As adolescents seek autonomy, especially in restrictive environments, they may explore identities and behaviours that symbolise freedom or control, including sexual expression and economic independence through transactional sex This trend is especially noticeable among teenaged girls who face gendered double standards, where boys are granted more freedom while girls are expected to uphold reputational purity. Scholars such as Ayodele et al. (2025) and Ajayi & Somefun (2019) argue that in contemporary Nigeria, many girls see transactional sex not only as survival but as empowerment, a way of reclaiming themselves in a world that has denied them voice and opportunity.

The theoretical foundations of this analysis are primarily based on social disorganisation theory and gendered power theory. Social disorganisation theory suggests that a breakdown in community structures and institutions such as schools, families, and law enforcement agencies leads to increased deviance and crime (Shaw & McKay, 1942; Sampson, 2012). When applied to underage prostitution, it helps explain how the weakening of social controls in urban settings can foster environments conducive to exploitation. Gendered power theory, especially Connell’s (1987) concept of hegemonic masculinity, offers a perspective on how unequal gender relations are expressed through transactional sex. In societies where male dominance is both structurally and culturally reinforced, the sexual commodification of girls reflects and reinforces broader gender inequalities. Feminist extensions of this theory further illustrate how girls’ bodies become sites of negotiation for power, resources, and sometimes survival.

**Methodology**

This study adopted both quantitative and qualitative approaches that enable an in-depth and nuanced understanding of the issue by simultaneously collecting and analysing both numerical data and in-depth narratives (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Palinkas et al., 2015).

**Study Locations**

Data were collected from five strategic urban and peri-urban locations in Nigeria, which are Makurdi (Benue State), Jos (Plateau State), Port Harcourt (Rivers State), Lagos (Lagos State), and Abuja (FCT). These cities were purposively selected due to their high urbanisation rates, socio-economic diversity, and the prevalence of transactional sex and youth vulnerability reported in prior studies (Adebayo & Kolawole, 2021; UNODC, 2023).

**Study Population and Sampling**

The population for this study comprised adolescents aged 12 to 19, social workers, community leaders, parents, law enforcement officials, and civil society actors as depicted Table 1 below. The study focused on adolescents in both formal and informal settings, including those engaged in commercial and transactional sex or at risk of exploitation.

Table 1: The gender distribution of the participants

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Component | Female n (%) | Male n (%) | Preferred not to say | Total n | Notes |
| Adolescent survey | 281 (76%) | 81 (21.9%) | 8 (2.2%) | 370 | Percentages rounded; counts sum to 370 |
| In-depth interviews (IDIs) | 30 (81.1%) | 6 (16.2%) | 1 (2.7%) | 37 | Counts align with stated proportions |
| Focus group discussions (FGDs) | Mixed-gender | Mixed-gender | Mixed-gender | 5 groups | 5 FGDs, 6–8 participants each; qualitative, not disaggregated |

A multi-stage purposive and snowball sampling technique was adopted. The researcher firstly identified, the five cities which were purposively selected. This was followed by identifying communities or neighbourhoods known for high vulnerability or informal economic activity were identified through consultations with local NGOs and social workers. In the final stage, participants were recruited using snowballing (especially for survivors) and purposive expert sampling (for professionals and caregivers) (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

**Data Collection Instruments**

***Questionnaire***

The researchers administered questionnaires to 370 adolescents across the five cities. The questionnaire was designed to capture participants' demographic details, family background, sexual health education exposure, aspirations, media consumption habits, peer influence, and views on institutional trust and governance. The instrument was pilot-tested in a non-study area to ensure clarity and reliability (Creswell & Creswell, 2022; Palinkas et al., 2015).

***In-depth Interview***

The in-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted with 37 survivors of underage prostitution, frontline social workers, and religious or community leaders. across Abuja, Lagos, Jos, Makurdi, and Port Harcourt to capture personal narratives and nuanced insights into their lived experiences. Each interview lasted between 45 to 60 minutes and explored themes such as family background, exposure to sexual health education, peer influence, aspirations, and encounters with institutions such as schools, religious bodies, and law enforcement. The one-on-one format provided a safe and confidential space for participants to express themselves without peer pressure, allowing for deeper exploration of sensitive issues, personal motivations, and perceptions surrounding prostitution (Creswell &Creswell, 2022).

***Focus Group Discussions***

Five focus group discussions (FGDs) were also held, one per city with adolescent participants to ensure gender balance and age sensitivity. Each FGD included between six to eight participants. The discussions focused on shared community-level experiences, media influences, perceptions of quick wealth, social norms, and the stigma surrounding underage prostitution.

**Ethical Considerations**

This study strictly adhered to ethical standards applicable to research involving children and teenagers and vulnerable groups. Informed consent was obtained from all adult participants, while assent was obtained from minors with consent provided by their parents, guardians, or designated community representatives. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to participants.

**Data Analysis**

The questionnaire data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequency distributions, percentages, and cross-tabulations) via SPSS and Microsoft Excel. This facilitated the identification of broad trends and the prevalence of key variables such as early exposure to sexual content, family structure, and media influence.

The recorded responses from the IDIs and FGDs were transcribed and coded using NVivo 14. A thematic analysis approach was employed to allow inductive identification of patterns and narratives across interviews and FGDs. These were further mapped onto the study’s conceptual framework to provide insights into how governance, culture, and familial dysfunction interact to drive early sexual exploitation (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013).

**Triangulation**

To enhance validity and reliability, the study adopted methodological triangulation by combining quantitative (survey questionnaires) and qualitative (in-depth interviews and focus group discussions) approaches across the five urban and peri-urban locations of Abuja, Lagos, Jos, Makurdi, and Port Harcourt. Findings from both strands were systematically compared for convergence, complemented to explain patterns, and expanded to capture emerging insights, such as underage individuals perceiving prostitution as freedom or as a survival strategy shaped by illiteracy and early exposure to crime.

**Empirical Findings and Discussions**

This section is divided into three parts: quantitative findings and discussion, qualitative findings and discussion and the triangulation.

**Quantitative Findings**

This section presents the quantitative results obtained from the structured survey administered across five urban and peri-urban locations: Abuja, Makurdi, Jos, Port Harcourt, and Lagos. A total of 370 valid responses were analysed.

**Inadequate Sex Education and Poor Awareness**

Across all five cities, an average of 68% of participants had no formal sex education, and 75.1% learned about sex from peers or unregulated internet sources, as depicted in Table 2.0.

Table 2.0: Inadequate sex education and poor awareness

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Location | No formal sex education (%) | Learnt about sex from peers/internet (%) |
| Abuja | 64.0 | 70.3 |
| Makurdi | 71.5 | 77.1 |
| Jos | 69.8 | 76.0 |
| Port Harcourt | 65.4 | 74.2 |
| Lagos | 69.1 | 77.9 |
| Average | 68.0 | 75.1 |

This result reveals a critical knowledge gap that leaves adolescents vulnerable to misinformation and manipulation. Although the results were within a close range, Lagos, Makurdi, and Jos recorded especially high percentages, which were above the averages, possibly due to less developed school-based reproductive health programmes, insensitivity, or neglect. In contrast, Abuja and Port Harcourt, though slightly lower, still reflected concerning levels of educational failure.

The absence of structured sex education fosters a breeding ground for distorted perceptions of sex and normalises risky behaviour. The informal knowledge many adolescents rely on is often sensationalised, inaccurate, or exploitative, increasing their susceptibility to early sexual debut and transactional sex.

**Quick Wealth Syndrome and Social Media Influence**

The findings reveal that nearly 6 in 10 adolescents have engaged in transactional sex, with 65% citing social media or peer influence as motivators. In Table 3.0, the data were particularly high in Lagos and Makurdi, which are known for intense consumer culture and visible wealth disparities

Table 3.0: Quick wealth syndrome and social media influence

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Location | Engaged in transactional sex (%) | Influenced by social media/peers (%) |
| Abuja | 58.3 | 61.2 |
| Makurdi | 61.0 | 67.4 |
| Jos | 55.7 | 62.1 |
| Port Harcourt | 59.9 | 64.5 |
| Lagos | 63.1 | 69.7 |
| Average | 59.6 | 65.0 |

This supports the growing narrative that adolescent sexual behaviour is increasingly influenced by the digital portrayal of fast wealth, status symbols, and unrealistic lifestyle expectations.

Social media platforms and peer pressure expose youth to curated lives of influencers and peers, reinforcing the idea that financial success and desirability are earned through materialism and appearances. As these beliefs take root, adolescents may rationalise prostitution as an acceptable shortcut to prosperity, especially in cities where the socio-economic divide is most visible.

**Family Dysfunction**

Family-related issues, particularly abuse, neglect, or the absence of parental guidance, remain significant triggers for underage prostitution. With over 61.8% reporting family dysfunction, and 54.2% indicating they left home due to crises, as indicated in Table 4.0, the family unit in many urban and peri-urban centres is not acting as the protective structure it should be.

Table 4.0: Family dysfunction and abuse

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Location | Broken/abusive family background (%) | Ran away due to family crisis (%) |
| Abuja | 60.2 | 52.6 |
| Makurdi | 63.7 | 55.4 |
| Jos | 64.4 | 57.8 |
| Port Harcourt | 60.9 | 51.2 |
| Lagos | 60.1 | 54.0 |
| Average | 61.8 | 54.2 |

Jos and Makurdi showed the highest levels of reported familial abuse, due to local socio-economic distress or breakdown in traditional family support systems. Even in relatively more urbanised cities like Abuja, Lagos and Port Harcourt, these issues persist. When home becomes a space of trauma rather than refuge, adolescents are pushed toward the streets or exploitative survival strategies.

**Peer Pressure**

Peer influence is a crucial factor in adolescent involvement in sex work. In Table 5.0, approximately 47.5% reported being introduced to prostitution by peers, while 44% indicated they joined specific groups or gangs before their initiation. This shows how peer relationships serve as both informal support systems and gateways to exploitation.

Table 5.0: Peer pressure and group influence

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Location | Peer-influenced entry into sex work (%) | Joined group before entry (%) |
| Abuja | 44.5 | 41.9 |
| Makurdi | 49.1 | 45.6 |
| Jos | 47.3 | 44.2 |
| Port Harcourt | 45.6 | 42.7 |
| Lagos | 51.0 | 46.0 |
| Average | 47.5 | 44.0 |

Cities like Lagos and Makurdi showed elevated rates, suggesting more entrenched peer-group cultures or cliques in those environments. Often, once one member of a group engages in sex work, the rest are likely to follow due to shared resources, protection, and normalisation of the activity. This points to the need for strategic peer-led interventions that counteract negative group influence and offer alternatives rooted in empowerment and skills acquisition.

**Distrust in Law Enforcement**

Law enforcement failures and weak institutional support are major enablers of underage prostitution. Table 6.0 shows that an average of 52.9% of participants said cases involving underage sex work were reported but not acted upon, while 58.6% expressed distrust in relevant government institutions. This climate of impunity discourages victims or concerned citizens from seeking help, creating an enabling environment for exploitation.

Table 6.0: Distrust in law enforcement agencies and government failures

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Location | Reported cases with no police action (%) | Distrust in government agencies (%) |
| Abuja | 51.0 | 56.4 |
| Makurdi | 54.7 | 59.8 |
| Jos | 52.9 | 60.1 |
| Port Harcourt | 53.1 | 57.5 |
| Lagos | 53.0 | 59.1 |
| Average | 52.9 | 58.6 |

The situation was particularly concerning in Makurdi, Jos, and Lagos, where reported corruption, bureaucracy, or indifference erode trust in the system. Until institutional mechanisms are made more responsive and transparent, the fight against underage prostitution will continue to be undermined by apathy and impunity.

**Qualitative Findings and Discussion**

To protect the participants' identity, pseudonyms were deployed. P implies participant, and number refers to the participant's age and then the cities. This section presents two excerpts for each of the emerging themes.

**Poor Sex Education** The participants in Makurdi, Jos, and Abuja frequently indicated that their entry into sexual activity began with a lack of structured or accurate information about sex and reproductive health as illustrated in excerpt 1 & 2.

Excerpt 1: P16, Makurdi

*“I first heard about sex when I was 11, but nobody told me what it meant. My mum never talked to me. All I knew was from social media and my classmates.”*

Excerpt 2: P17, Jos:

*“There’s no talk about body or feelings at home. Most of us learn things from our peers or see things online. Parents just assume we know nothing.”*

This educational void, often worsened by cultural taboos around discussing sex at home, leaves adolescents vulnerable to be dependent towards peer influence and experimentation. In some cases, misconceptions learned from social media or friends created conditions where transactional sex was normalised early on. The finding emphasises the critical failure of both formal and informal education systems in providing young people with the tools to make informed choices.

**Peer Influence and Social Image**

From Lagos to Port Harcourt, peer pressure that leads to social image becomes a recurrent driver. In densely populated urban areas where consumerism and digital exposure are intense, adolescents adopt sexual transactions not just for survival but to match the lifestyle expectations of their peer group. In excerpts 3 & 4, the participants described situations where girls as young as 14 competed with one another for attention, material goods, and popularity, often linked to sexual appeal or relationships with older men.

Excerpt 3: P15, Lagos:

*“All my friends had boyfriends who gave them money or gifts. I was the only one trekking to school. One day, my friend introduced me to someone. He started giving me money too.”*

Excerpt 4: Social worker, Port Harcourt:

*“In our area, if you’re not into runs [casual sex for money], you look like a fool. Even some mothers encourage it if the girl brings something home.”*

The quest for social capital is therefore a subtle but powerful factor, with adolescents seeing sex as a commodity used to maintain social relevance.

**Family Dysfunction**

The stories gathered across Abuja and Jos reveal that many underage individuals involved in prostitution were either victims of incest, physical abuse, neglect, or severe poverty. Excerpts 5 & 6 shows that in several cases, the home was a source of trauma rather than refuge, pushing adolescents to flee.

Excerpt 5: P16, Abuja

*“My father beats my mother every time, and sometimes he touches me inappropriately. I left home and moved in with one of my friends. That’s when I started ‘doing it’ to survive.”*

Excerpt 6: NGO worker, Jos:

*“Most of these girls didn’t just wake up and choose this life. They’re escaping something such as abuse, neglect, or poverty. Their stories are deep.”*

With no support networks, many found shelter with strangers or exploitative ‘aunties’ who introduced them to sex work. These findings suggest that underage prostitution is not just an economic or moral issue, but a crisis of family systems, where breakdown in parental roles and protection opens a pathway into the streets.

**Institutional Apathy**

In Makurdi, Lagos, and Port Harcourt, . victims or their advocates often face stigmatisation, inaction, or outright dismissal, particularly in rape or trafficking cases involving minors as seen in excertps 7 & 8.

Excerpt 7: Child rights advocate, Makurdi

*“A man was caught with two girls last year, both under 15. We took him to the police. By the next week, he was out, and the girls were blamed for following him.”*

Excerpt 8: P18, Lagos

*“You report a rape case, and they ask you if you’re a virgin. Or they’ll say you’re lying to get money. Many girls don’t bother reporting anymore.”*

In places like Makurdi, social workers described how cultural negotiations or family interference often sabotage prosecution. This lack of accountability sends the wrong message to both perpetrators and victims, reinforcing a cycle where sexual abuse and prostitution are met with societal indifference or complicity.

**Emerging Trend: Prostitution as Personal Freedom and Identity**

In Port Harcourt and Abuja, a small but growing number of adolescents framed their involvement in prostitution not in terms of victimhood but rather personal agency and empowerment. This perception as expressed in excerpts 9 & 10 challenges conventional narratives. For some, sex work offers a perceived escape from parental control, poverty, or societal restrictions, and is viewed as a path to independence.

Excerpt 9: P17, Port Harcourt

*“People say I’m a prostitute, but I’m free. I don’t depend on anybody. I make my money, I dress well, I take care of myself. What’s wrong with that? What’s the difference between a girl with multiple boyfriends and a divorced woman?”*

Excerpt 10: Youth mobiliser, Abuja

*“You’ll be surprised how many girls are doing it, not because they are forced, but because they see it as a lifestyle. They say it gives them power and connections.”*

The idea of sex-for-pleasure-and-profit being legitimate among adolescents is new and complex, often rooted and normalised in social media glamorisation of the “runs girl” lifestyle. While still controversial, this view highlights the need for nuanced policy responses that address not only risk and coercion but also ideology and identity.

**Emerging Trend: Illiteracy, Crime Exposure, and Prostitution as Legitimate Hustle**

In Jos, Lagos, and parts of Makurdi, interviews uncovered a disturbing trend of illiteracy and environmental conditioning. Excerpts 11 & 12 showed that some underage individuals grow up surrounded by drugs, sex, and petty crime, and come to see prostitution as a valid source of income and identity.

Excerpt 11: P18, Jos

*“My sister was already going out with men when she was 14. She didn’t go to school. I followed her path. It’s how we survive.”*

Excerpt 12: Police officer, Lagos:

*“The problem is that many of these girls have never known anything different. They grow up in slums, see theft and sex from a young age. They see this life as normal. They will tell that they are stealing anyone’s money”*

For these girls, sex work is not a temporary or coerced action; it is seen as a rational career path given their environment and lack of opportunities. Their choices, while shaped by structural deprivation, are real and deeply rooted. This finding introduces a hard-to-reach subpopulation that may resist conventional interventions or rehabilitation efforts.

**Triangulation: Synthesising Quantitative and Qualitative Findings**

The integration of both data strands reveals a complex interplay of structural, relational, and individual-level dynamics that singular data types would struggle to fully capture on their own.

From the quantitative data, poverty emerged as the most frequently cited driver, while the qualitative accounts pushed this understanding further, exposing how poverty was not just a condition of material lack, but a psychological and social pressure to maintain relevance in an environment obsessed with material symbols and peer validation. This convergence between the statistical frequency and lived experience paints a fuller picture of prostitution as not only a survival strategy but a response to both economic and symbolic exclusion.

In like manner, family dysfunction, while already significant in the quantitative data, gained greater emotional depth through the qualitative strand. The data showed a notable proportion of participants citing broken homes, loss of parents, or family abuse as contributing factors. Interviews revealed the emotional voids, traumatic experiences, and often violent paths through which young girls became estranged from their households.

An equally compelling area of intersection lies in the theme of sex education and knowledge about reproductive health. Quantitative results showed significant levels of ignorance among participants regarding sexual rights, contraception, or the risks of early sex. Importantly, qualitative data introduced the element of deception, with many girls initially unaware that what they were experiencing was considered as rape or abuse. This triangulation reinforces the critical need for context-appropriate, early, and structured sex education to be reinforced, and not merely as a curriculum item, but as a protective strategy.

based on the findings, one area where the data diverges but also complements itself is in the domain of agency and identity. A surprising minority of participants, especially in Lagos and Port Harcourt, indicated in the surveys that prostitution was not coerced but self-initiated. These responses at first appear counterintuitive, but the qualitative narratives contextualise them as part of an emerging ideology among some adolescents who frame sex work as empowerment or a declaration of independence from societal judgment and control. These adolescents do not necessarily view themselves as victims, but as actors navigating an unequal system with the tools available to them. This insight from triangulation is critical; while traditional intervention models often assume all child sex workers are coerced, this subset of participants challenges that narrative. It demands a rethinking of engagement strategies provide more viable, sustainable alternatives.

This triangulation also illuminated the structural and institutional dimensions of underage prostitution. Quantitative data revealed a high level of distrust toward law enforcement and justice mechanisms. Victims not only failed to find protection in the system, but often found themselves re-victimised by it. This highlights the importance of structural reform, particularly in justice delivery, police conduct, and victim support systems.

A distinctive insight from triangulation lies in the emerging theme of the illiterate and crime-conditioned adolescent. While education level was not directly explored in the survey instrument as a central variable, cross-tabulations showed a high prevalence of non-school-attending participants, particularly in Jos and Lagos. The qualitative data further showcased testimonials of young girls who had never been to school or had dropped out at a very early age. This triangulated insight presents a category of vulnerable adolescents who require not just protection, but intense rehabilitation, re-socialisation, and educational re-engagement.

Ultimately, the synthesis of both data types affirms that addressing underage prostitution in Nigeria demands not just rescue operations or punitive measures, but a holistic approach that cuts across education, mental health, law enforcement reform, community healing, and economic inclusion.

**Conclusion and Recommendations**

Notably, the study uncovered new dimensions that are often neglected in mainstream discourse and policymaking: the rise of illiterate and crime-conditioned adolescents who normalise prostitution as part of their survival toolkit, and a growing subset of children who see prostitution not as victimhood but as resistance or economic empowerment. These findings challenge the simplistic binary of victim-perpetrator and call for deeper, more contextualised intervention strategies. Considering these insights, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Design and Implement Comprehensive Sex Education: Governments and non-governmental organisations must prioritise the inclusion of structured, culturally appropriate, and early-stage sex education in both formal and informal educational settings.
2. Multi-level Family Strengthening Programs: There is a need for widespread family-based interventions that support parenting skills, provide psycho-social support to broken families, and engage caregivers in high-risk communities.
3. Youth Empowerment through Inclusive Education: Alternative education and skills acquisition programs should be aggressively rolled out, particularly targeting out-of-school girls and illiterate minors in urban slums and crime-prone areas.
4. Community-Led Social Reorientation Campaigns: Targeted behavioural change communication (BCC) strategies should be community-led, media-savvy, and youth-centric. Social influencers, religious leaders, and local champions must be part of this change.
5. Reform Law Enforcement and Justice Systems: Urgent police reform and capacity-building are required to ensure child-sensitive policing, fast-tracked prosecution of sexual exploiters, and the establishment of safe reporting and rehabilitation spaces for survivors.
6. Build Local Intelligence and Data Systems: Real-time community-level data collection systems should be established to identify emerging prostitution hotspots and track trends.
7. Engage Adolescents as Partners in Intervention: Programs should move from "saving" to "engaging." Policies should be designed to respect their voices, include their insights, and co-develop solutions that are empowering, not patronising.
8. Integrated Multisectoral Collaboration: The complexity of underage prostitution demands a collaborative approach involving the ministries of health, education, youth development, women's affairs, justice, and security. This synergy should result in a National Framework for Preventing and Addressing Underage Prostitution, complete with monitoring and evaluation indicators.

In summary, underage prostitution in Nigeria’s urban and peri-urban contexts is not a symptom of moral decay alone, but of systemic neglect and societal contradictions. Any attempt to address it must be courageous enough to move beyond surface explanations and address the root drivers head-on.

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