

ROLE OF COMMUNITY SUPPORT SYSTEM AND THE MEDIA IN CURTAILING THE UNDERREPORTING OF INCEST IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

In recent times, especially in Nigeria, there has been a rapid increase in incest as reported by Aruna (2018). As such, it is important that more empirical studies be focused on it, especially on such issues as the link between poor community support system and the ineffective media reporting system in curtailing incest. Issues raised in the paper included the causes of incest, effects on victims and weapons of incest used by perpetrators on the victims and the barriers to reporting incest. The study adopted a phenomenological approach to gather data, using primary and secondary sources. Primary sources of data collection included in-depth interviews and focused group discussion while secondary data were obtained from books, journal articles, newspapers, magazines and the internet. Fifty respondents were selected using the purposive sampling technique. Findings show that causes of

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incest include depression, loneliness and psychological problem of perpetrators who use cruelties, blackmail, torture, punishment, abuse and deprivation as weapons to harass their victims. Effects on the victims include post-traumatic syndrome, increased anxiety about health and panic attacks. Findings also show that aspects of community support system such as religion and culture were hindrances to reporting incest by the victims. This study recommends that more community support systems, including non-governmental organizations, vigilante, medical groups as well as faith-based organizations should be retrained on the importance of reporting incest. The mass media should educate the public on early warning signs of incest.

Keywords: Incest, Media, Females, Nigeria, Community Support System, Underreporting

Introduction

One common form of the sexual abuse of children is incest. This act which has been defined as sexual contact that occurs between family members. It is a sexual activity with a person from within the immediate family. However, the exact relationships which can be construed as incest will vary from culture to culture. Many countries have laws that forbid incest but there is considerable variation in the exact nature of these (Cyr, Wright, McDuff and Perron, 2002). Numerous studies on violence against women have been conducted, but there is a scarcity of information on the number of women who were sexually abused during their childhood and adolescence. Indeed, it is like a tip of the iceberg in which only the smallest portion emerges while a large run unquantifiable part remains unreported (Romito, 2008). However, estimated findings suggest that one-third of women have experienced sexual

abuse while growing up (World Health Organization, 2017) and particularly during their childhood (Elliott and Briere, 1995). The offender is usually reported as a male family member in most cases but female involvement cannot be totally overruled. Although sibling incest is thought to be the most frequently occurring form of incest, the abuse of daughters by fathers or stepfathers is more commonly reported. According to Kutz (2005), the father, who is the perpetrator, is typically an immature individual with low self-esteem, while the mother is depressed, helpless or otherwise emotionally absent. The father often uses alcohol to allay his inhibitions before molesting his daughters. Theories have proposed that girls allow the sexual relationship to continue in order to prevent family disunity (Herman, 2000; Russell, 1999).

By definition, incest is the sexual conduct between family members too closely related to be married, such as sexual conduct with a child, sibling, parent or grandparent. Millan, Cruz and Reyes (2017) note that incest relates to sexual activity between two people who are related through blood linkage. Incestuous relationships include those between sister to brother, father to daughter, uncle to niece, cousin to cousin, son to mother, among others. It can include touching, kissing, masturbation, oral sex and penetrative sex. Non-touching sexual abuse may involve introducing a much younger child to pornography, forcing them to watch a perpetrator masturbate or watching the victim in the shower or during other private moments. Research shows that incest is widely underreported (Russell, 1986). Authors such as Millan et al (2017) note that many victims of incest do not speak out or report due to fear of destroying family reputation and bringing shame to the family. In addition, dependence on the perpetrators by victims for economic, educational, housing and other social support as well as the use of threat sometimes hinder the victims from reporting. A sexually abusive relationship is one over which a child or young woman has no control. A trusted family member or friend uses his power, as well as a child's love and dependence, to initiate sexual contact and often to ensure that the relationship continues and remains secret.

It sometimes results into post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, substance abuse, self-harming, eating disorders, sleep disorders, flashbacks and anxiety attacks any time there is a trigger. These triggers occur whenever the victim sees the family member who is the perpetrator. Despite the known fact that children are more likely to be sexually abused by an adult they know, parents teach children to expect danger from strangers and not from trusted authority figures. It is understandable, given this fact, that a violation of trust by a close family member is so terribly frightening and confusing. For many victims, not being able to process what happened can lead to an inability to live a mentally healthy life. When the perpetrator is a family member, children may not have a trusted adult to turn to for help. This is why it sometimes takes longer for them to get help.

In Nigeria, the act of incest is frowned at by the society, culture and religion. The Matrimonial Causes Act, 2004 (as amended) prohibited it though not to a criminal extent. However, most acts of incest are usually committed under threat, manipulation and force. It is thus a great concern that incest occurrences could lead to an unhealthy and weak society if proactive measures are not taken to stop them. Hence, the justification of this paper which raises pressing issues concerning incest.

Empirical Evidences

In recent times, pertinent literature citing the prevalence rates, personality and environmental factors which may contribute to the sexual abuse of children has increased (Collins, Willie, Hamlin, Marie, Minor and Knasel 1982). In many Nigerian cultures, incest is considered a taboo. It is understood as sexual intercourse between persons who are too closely related to be married or have any sexual relationship. However, drawing from historical experiences there were arguments over what can be termed a universal incest taboo. Tidefors, Arvidsson and Larsson (2010) citing Parlor (1996) explain that during the era of the Roman occupation of Egypt there was a rise in brother-sister marriages. The reason adduced for this form of incest was to promote what was termed as own and

“pure” people and to control the distribution of land for agriculture. This was because their daughters who got married to outsiders also had a share of the family land. Parker (1990), Scheidel (1990), cited in Tidefors et al (2010), explain that the main reason for this institutionalised incest was materialistic. Note that at this point that there exists limited scholarly works on incest. Hence the actual incidence may not be accurately known. Even though there are estimates here and there, these figures might have simply underscored the fact that the victims reported represent the tip of the iceberg of a significant rising social threat. Research has shown that in limited cases, mothers with histories of being sexually abused as children wittingly or unwittingly contribute to the causal chain of events leading to father-daughter incest (Stroebele, O’Keefe, Beard, Kuo, Swindel and Stroupe, 2013). The act of incest, insidiously and persistently plagues childhood worldwide. However, the act is both under-researched and underreported. (Studer, Sribney, Aylwin and Reddon 2011 ;Middleton, 2013). Reasons underlying this shortcoming are related to moral and cultural censorship. Some of the factors responsible for silence on incestuous affairs include the society’s attitudes towards this very sensitive topic, religious sentiments, legal implications, stigmatisation, and cultural beliefs that affect both the perpetrator and the victim as well as fear of ostracism by members of the community (Collins et al, 1982). Sibling incest can be seen as a way to compensate for unfulfilled emotional needs for nurture and comfort (Ojo and Olufemi, 2013; Haskins (2003),).

Discussing issues of incest, especially by a family member with a group of women, throw open some other angles to abuse and incest which appear to have received scanty scholarly or policy makers’ concern. Enough attention has not been paid to incestuous relationships thus allowing more victims, especially the females, fall prey (Pepper, 2014). Incest is a form of violence that is very serious and dangerous because of its psychological effects. More than any other type of child abuse, incest is associated with secrecy, betrayal, powerlessness, guilt, conflicted loyalty, fear of reprisal and self-blame/shame (Diana, 1987). These factors may be responsible

for the few percentages of incest cases reported by victims. A number of incestuous atrocities either go unreported by the victims or undetected by family members. Those that are eventually discovered are kept secret in the name of protecting the family name. Affected children are not physically or psychologically prepared to handle recurring sexual stimulation. This is why sexual abuse often has a lasting negative impact on the life of the victims.

In Nigeria, incest between fathers and daughters is hardly reported because nobody wants such a story to be heard outside the family. Nevertheless, this form of defilement of a female child devastates the lives of the children and their families causing severe physical and psychological pain and suffering, unwanted pregnancy and abortion including death, as well as sexually transmitted infectious diseases (Lisak, 2011).

Empirical Studies

Tidefors, et al (2010) studied the differences regarding the characteristics of a group of adolescent sibling incest offenders that were compared to a group of adolescent non-sibling offenders. Findings reveal that the incest offender group had grown up in more dysfunctional families. The results also showed that the offending behaviour in the incest group was more severe and that sibling incest can be one sign of maltreatment during childhood.

Herzog (2019) who worked with a group of genetic counsellors reviewed four studies on the effects of first-incest on the health of the offspring. Forty percent of the children were born with either autosomal recessive disorders, congenital physical malformations or severe intellectual deficits. Another fourteen had mild mental disabilities. Thus, the findings noted that the chances that a child who is the product of incest will suffer early death, a severe birth defect or some mental deficiency is around fifty percent.

Another empirical study by Bass, Brent and Taylor (2006) focused on incest in two Latino families experiencing sibling incest. They found that the families viewed incest as normal or as a mistake. Some concepts that explained the response of the families are the level of family cohesion, role of secrecy and view of outside systems.

Methodology

This study is a qualitative research in peace and conflict studies. Adopting the qualitative-phenomenological approach is considered in the literature to be the most reliable for investigating people's life experiences and their interpretation of meanings (Denzin, 1995; Gill, 2014). The combination of the emic view of the participants and the interpretative etic view of the researchers helps the understanding of cultural issues on practical terms. In-depth interviews were carried out on 60 participants across Nigeria using an unstructured interview guide. Twelve primary victims of incest, 5 parents, 3 journalists, 2 psychologists and the remaining 28 consist of parents, legal practitioners, teachers, medical personnel, counsellors and 10 men out of which 3 were perpetrators of incest. The snowball sampling technique was utilised for this study. This is due to the sensitivity of the subject and the hidden populations of study which limited researchers from gaining direct access to them without referrals. The respondents were selected using purposively sampling based on their involvement in incest as victims, perpetrators counsellors, security or medical personal.

Analysis and Discussion

It will not be justifiable to generalise the cause of incest. However, the interrogation two fathers on why they were sleeping with their daughters, unearthed different reasons the summary of which is tied to alcoholism, drug abuse, emotional imbalance and other multi-dimensional psychological issues. Obviously, these emotional imbalances stemmed from depression, loneliness, deprivation, or psychological issues. According to a perpetrator:

The mother left me when she was very young.
I have been the only one taking care of her...
I watched her grow and she is the only
close relatives left for me...I am sorry....

Another perpetrator claims: "I slept with my sister because of her beauty. I did it only five times and I usually give her money".

This is the reason given by a perpetrator:

She reminds me of my late wife
and I cannot let another man touch her...
I suffered to raise her.

It is evident from the above that there are different reasons why incest is committed, but for any reason, incest remains a punishable act under the Nigeria law. Noteworthy, is that section 33 of the Marriage Act forbids sexual relations and marriage among people who are related by blood. It is a prohibited degree of consanguinity. Moreover, in the First Schedule (Section 3) of the Matrimonial Causes Act, Cap 220, Law of the Federation of Nigeria (LFN) 1990, incest is listed as the prohibited degree of consanguinity to include that between father and daughter, mother and son, brother and sister, uncle and aunt, niece, and nephew. Again, Section 214 (3) of the Criminal Code Act (a criminal law that is applicable in and covers all parts of Nigeria) and Caption 77, Law of the Federation of Nigeria (LFN) prescribes a minimum of 14 years' imprisonment for those found guilty of incestuous liaison.

The twelve sexually abused girls interviewed for this study reported accompanied physical aggression, cruelties, violence, blackmail and torture. According to some of the victims:

My father would come home drunk, crawled by my side and start moving his hands over my body... when I tried to stop, he would beat me, cover my mouth and threaten not to give me money for food (In-depth Interview 18 August, 2018)

Another stated that:

...He would tell me he loves me and when I try to stop him, he would start begging and crying, asking if this is how I want to pay him back...My mother have died a long time ago (In-depth Interview, 12 August, 2018)

An interviewee mentioned that if she needed to buy something, she had to undergo another round of sexual abuse by her father. She grew up to accept this as a norm and therefore, felt no need to seek intervention. According to her, there is a feeling of wrong doing and guilt for what happened in her childhood and which she has since then not been able to forget. She feels she encouraged her father's abuse due to greed for material things as well as the prestige of being the favourite among her siblings. As a result, these fathers taught their female wards to exchange sex for money and gifts. The victims would grow up to believe sex is a unique means of exchange for the satisfaction of any need. The consequence of this is the rise in prostitution which over the years, has been treated by scholars and policy makers as a sickness rather than a symptom (Warren, 1990).

Some of such incestuous abuses have also been reported by the mass media. An example is a case of a 15-year-old girl who disclosed her story at the Ketu Police Station in Lagos state. She narrated how her father would give her five hundred naira in order to have carnal knowledge of her. According to her, the father started sleeping with her while she was 13 years. So far, he has had sex with her three times and usually

gives her five hundred naira (#500) each time (Nigeria Bulletin, March 17, 2017). Another report in the media is that of a middle-aged man, Moses, in Edo State who was recently arrested by the police for allegedly defiling and impregnating his 13-year-old daughter. The suspect had been having carnal knowledge of his daughter as far back as when the child was seven years old, a clear case of incest, child abuse and molestation. It was also when neighbours discovered that the girl was pregnant for her father that they informed the police and he was arrested (The Guardian, 20 March, 2019).

Victims of incest present certain peculiar traits and behaviours some of which are lower self-esteem, more troubled relationship with their mothers, more sexualised attitudes and more aggression turned inwardly than girls who have not undergone incest from equally dysfunctional families. The powerful impact of incest on the pre-pubertal child is thereby underscored (Hotte & Rafman, 1992). In general, physical symptoms associated with girl-child sexual abuse may include vaginal pain, rectal pain, vaginal discharge, bleeding and bed wetting while psychological symptoms include aggressive behaviour, poor concentration, poor performance at school, depression, phobias and precocious sexual behaviour with peers.

One of the interviewed victims of incest said that when she tried to escape sexual abuse, she was subjected to torture and punishment by her father (Oral interview, 2019). Some others suffered threats, stalking, abuse and punishment like being refused money for clothing, school materials and general upkeep allowances. Another victim whose perpetrator was the elder brother reported frequent physical torture, and constant subjection to sexual violence from which she could not free herself. Note that incestuous relationships with brothers often start from a different connotation of friendship and sibling closeness. It is usually a smooth ride from such 'playful brother' closeness to gradual touching and sensuous caressing which later results in consensual or forced sexual intercourse.

A lot of victims were convinced that normal relationships between siblings may include sexual experiences and that the abuse perpetrated by brothers could be acceptable. In fact, spiritual beliefs such as ‘twin flames’ and ‘soul mates’ were often used to perpetrate the act of incest. Evidence shows the victim is sometimes brainwashed to believe she is connected with the perpetrator on a deeper, supernatural level. In the same manner, the phrase from many religious books that ‘nothing is new under the sun’ is often used to further convince the victims. In half of the cases, victims kept the secret till adulthood. They did not disclose to anyone because they thought that their experience was not conceivable and that they were not able to immediately tell others about the abuse. The victim, therefore, continues to conceal the problem with the belief that things will change. In almost all cases, the experience of incestuous abuse was later revealed in adulthood to friends, relatives or partners. However, victims often lack the confidence to report the perpetrator at the time of abuse. Out of the cases investigated, only four were reported on time thanks to the mothers or siblings’ help. These outstanding relatives defiled all religious and cultural barriers and accused the fathers and/or the brother during the process. They were able to face them directly in the eye, damning all consequences. This singular act of courage, it was gathered, put an end to the abuse. Nevertheless, victims still have to undergo a series of routine counselling and rehabilitation.

Evidently, incest has serious implications on the lives of victims which can compromise their peace and well-being. It has adverse effects on the personality and agency of females in peace activity. The development of victims into passive individuals, who are unable to defend themselves is an indicator of individuals who will be unable to set limits or stand up for their basic human rights in the future. Often times, extreme infantile traits are noticed in victims. With these traits present, they tend to behave like a child even though they have reached adulthood stage. According to experts, this inhibition could have been derived from the psychodynamic

effect of the self-blame, related to the idea that the sexual relationships with the father or brother produced some convenient advantages (Testoni, Mariani, and [Zamperini](#) 2018). This belief undermined the victim's self-esteem and sense of personal dignity and integrity. Psychological scarring resulting from these sexually traumatic events may not present themselves for several years. Instead, they tend to exhibit behaviours related with frigidity, depression, uncontrolled violence and rage, as well as other anti-social behaviours. These are expressions of outrage at the betrayal and insecurity that the child had to endure as a victim of sexual and often physical abuse.

With regard to the re-victimisation, it was suggested that the latent self-blame related to the sexual relationships with a father could have undermined the ability to select and develop friendships, thereby influencing the wrong choice of violent partner in adulthood (Testoni et al, 2018) A victim narrated how she was not able to measure herself against her own affective needs in her relationship with her peers and even in adulthood she was not capable of meeting her own needs with a good partner. In addition, she confessed to a vast range of disorders testifying to the severe symptoms of post-traumatic syndrome such as eating disorders, and also, increased need for her to control her body and health. There is an increased anxiety about her health. This is known as hypochondria in science - a condition in which a person is excessively and unduly worried about having a serious illness (Berrios, 2001). Some other respondents mentioned constant panic attacks and inability to concentrate on activities. Moreover, there is usually a distrust and insecurity in relationships with others, especially with men. Numerous sexual and gynaecological problems are reported such as vomiting and sleep disturbances. In most cases, there were feelings of shame, deep sense of loneliness and guilt about victims' experiences. Hence many were not anxious to speak about it during this research.

It was discovered that the media and community support institutions such as security units (Nigeria Police Force), non-governmental organisations, traditional stakeholders, schools and religious bodies among several others still have a lot to do in curtailing incest in Nigeria society. Most of the interviewed persons showed keen interest in tackling the issue. However, the challenges lie in the many social stigmas that accompany incest. One of the reasons for this is because incest usually involves family members and both the perpetrators and victims are susceptible to shame. In fact, it was discovered that perpetrators and or victims would rather commit suicide after being found out than face prosecutions.

More importantly is the manner incest is often reported in the media. It was discovered that most newspapers do not report incest as important news worthy of public attention. If and when reported, it was usually in a small corner of a page with the picture of victims rather than the perpetrator. This further aggravates the traumatic effects of the incidence on victims while the identity of perpetrators (usually males) is protected. The reason for this may not be far-fetched from the patriarchy nature of many African states whereby preferences are given to the males against the females. This is considered negative spill-over effects of some of the homogenous socio-cultural beliefs and practices in Nigeria. Furthermore, many traditional and religious institutions would rather cover incidences of rape up by opting for secrecy. Perhaps, these are some of the reasons why incest has not received adequate attention that could foster its abolishment in Nigeria society. There is a pressing, need therefore for an inclusive, vibrant media and community support system in order to curtail incest and its diverse implications, especially for young females in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study focused on the role of community support systems and the media in curtailing the under reporting of incest. Instruments including interviews and focus group discussion were used to gather data. In addition

secondary data were also retrieved from newspaper, books and journals. 60 respondents were selected for this study from Ibadan and Lagos through purposive sampling.

The findings show that incestuous relationships or abuse result from emotional imbalance, ranging from depression, loneliness, deprivation and psychological issues. Some of the abuses that perpetrators who are usually blood relatives such as father, mother, brother or sister use on the victims include: physical aggression, cruelties, violence, blackmail, torture, punishment, threats and stalking. In addition, victims also reported various effects of incest on them such as post-traumatic syndrome, increased anxiety about their health and panic attacks.

This research in four major cities showed that incest is endemic in contemporary Nigeria and the problems of women who suffered from incest during their childhood is still under-surveyed in peace scholarship. Going by the United Nations Resolution 1325 and its attendant Resolution 1820, one could infer that there is still a lot to be done in order to attain a gender balanced globe. The viable justification for this is that a battered woman, with no peace in herself, cannot give what she does not have to the society. However, incest is preventable and can be totally eradicated. Since incest in childhood and adolescence is a traumatic experience that could severely interfere with the normal psychological development of survivors, it is crucial to develop methodologies and surveys to shed light on this kind of survivors psychologically. Moreover, recognising that some men and relatively few women are part of the problem, while others are part of the solution, a great number of men and women fall somewhere in the middle and this has made incest a pressing issue demanding urgent attention by scholars and policy makers. Finally, there is an associated paradoxical problem, which may hamper intervention for victims of incest. Specifically, battered women or abused girls are not necessarily abused because they have some psychopathologies that expose them to incestuous relationship. Undoubtedly, they are victims of offenders who

can be mentally insane and of a society that is culturally and structurally unable to prevent these aggressions. This study could reinforce the ability and competence of intervention aimed to minimise trauma, to empower female and child victims of incest and domestic violence, the re-construction of self-autonomy in such a way that they can state and their own decisions regardless of the violence they have experienced.

Recommendation

It is suggested, therefore, that apart from issuing birth certificates to children born in Nigeria, the government should provide state oversight over them, or prescribe a minimum standard of care that caregivers must provide. The Nigeria state should concern itself with important obligations of ratifying the fundamental rights of every child. This includes, basic education, essential medicine, protection against slavery, trafficking, or sexual violation. In addition, perpetrators of incest should be made to face the consequences of their actions. This will stop other potential perpetrators from continuing to take advantage of young, defenceless children and other vulnerable persons. Perpetrators should be made to face serious psychological screening and, if found to be in control of their faculties, be made to face the full wrath of the law. The Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) need to do more by speaking out against perpetrators and ensure swift justice for victim. Parents should be responsible for their wards and always report cases of rape, incest and indecent assault to the relevant authorities. The government should also create a social welfare system to protect abused children and ensure that victims are better protected against such depraved humans in society.

Finally, victims of incest are vulnerable to psychiatric complexities and venereal diseases transmitted through sexual abuse and therefore, should be tested for syphilis and other diseases such as herpes and pediculosis. Treatments and rehabilitation should be administered accordingly.

The mass media, including radio, television, magazines as well as the evolving social media should be used to campaign and set the agenda to address the issue of under reporting of incest. Nwosu (1996) explains that the media are powerful social institutions that can affect the society greatly. The media have the social responsibility of mobilizing members of the society against perpetrators of incest.

In the underreporting of incest, many duties can be attached to the mass media due to their massive reach that enables them to influence other institutions in the society, such as family, religion, education, business among others. Vraneski and Richter (2008) list the functions of the mass media to include reporting, interpreting and suggesting a broader meaning to events and monitoring the powerful in the society. Therefore, the media should advance the cause of victims of incest through the following functions:

1. Educating the society on incest and the diverse implications of the crime such as health implications as well as the social and legal consequences.
2. The media should provide information news on, and early warning signs that would enable victims or would be victims of incest to take appropriate actions such as reporting to security operatives, the mass media or relevant civil society organizations.
3. Set agenda for the society through prominence in reporting incest. Baran and Davis (2003) note that the mass media influence the audience by their choice of stories to consider news worthy and how much prominence and space to given to such stories.
4. Mobilize the society against incest by adequate reportage of cases of incest. Such reports would enable other institutions in the society to rise against this criminal practice.
5. Persuade individuals to take action against incest. In performing this function, the media present information based on facts drawn

from legal experts, health and social workers as well as victims of incest.

In addition, community support systems that would serve as safety nets for victims should be put in place. This include local police and other security outfits such as vigilante as well as Non-Governmental Organizations, religious, cultural and other relevant social institutions.

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