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Assessment of Sexual Abuse among Youths in Selected Churches in the Igala Community of Kogi State, Nigeria

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Abstract

Sexual abuse remains a significant social and public health concern that adversely affects the psychological, emotional, moral, and spiritual development of young people. This study assessed sexual abuse among youths in selected churches within the Igala community of Kogi State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study examined the effects of sexual abuse among church youths and identified possible strategies for reducing its occurrence. A descriptive survey research design was adopted. The population comprised 4,863 members from four Christian denominations, while 400 respondents were selected through cluster and simple random sampling techniques. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire and analysed using mean statistics and Chi-square at the 0.05 level of significance. The findings revealed that the major consequences of sexual abuse among youths include increased risk of sexually transmitted infections, anxiety and fear, psychological trauma, and moral deterioration. The study further found that comprehensive sexuality education, healthy interpersonal relationships, careful peer-group selection, practising chastity, and avoiding sexually explicit media were perceived as effective strategies for reducing sexual abuse among church youths. The Chi-square analysis indicated statistically significant perceptions regarding both the effects of sexual abuse and the proposed preventive measures, leading to the rejection of the null hypotheses. The study concludes that sexual abuse continues to pose serious threats to youth development within faith communities. It therefore recommends sustained sexuality education, stronger parental supervision, youth-focused counselling programmes, and collaborative interventions involving churches, families, schools, and community leaders to promote healthy sexual behaviour and safeguard young people.

Keywords: Sexual abuse, Youth, Church, Sexuality education, Igala community, Kogi State

Introduction

Sexual abuse has become one of the most persistent social and public health challenges affecting young people across the world. It transcends cultural, religious, economic, and geographical boundaries and continues to generate serious psychological, emotional, educational, social, and spiritual consequences for victims. Although considerable efforts have been made by governments, religious institutions, schools, and non-governmental organisations to address the problem, cases of sexual abuse remain prevalent, particularly among adolescents and young adults (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). Within faith-based communities, sexual abuse presents unique challenges because religious organisations are traditionally regarded as centres for moral instruction, character formation, and spiritual guidance. Unfortunately, recent empirical evidence inicates that religious settings are not immune to sexual exploitation, coercion, harassment, and other forms of abuse involving youths and vulnerable persons (UNICEF, 2023). The consequences often extend beyond physical harm to include depression, anxiety, low self-esteem, poor academic performance, substance abuse, social withdrawal, and loss of trust in religious institutions (Adebayo & Ibrahim, 2023). Nigeria has witnessed increasing concerns regarding sexual violence involving adolescents and young adults. National reports have highlighted growing cases of rape, sexual harassment, exploitation, child molestation, and online sexual abuse across communities. Although much research has focused on schools and households, relatively few studies have examined the occurrence of sexual abuse within church environments, especially among indigenous communities such as the Igala people of Kogi State. Understanding this context is essential because churches play a significant role in shaping moral values, social behaviour, and youth development.

The Igala community possesses strong cultural and religious values that traditionally discourage sexual misconduct. However, rapid social change, increased internet access, exposure to sexually explicit media, weakening family structures, peer pressure, and substance abuse have contributed to changing sexual behaviours among young people. These developments have increased the vulnerability of many youths to different forms of sexual abuse despite continued religious teachings promoting chastity and moral discipline.

Against this background, this study assessed sexual abuse among youths in selected churches in the Igala community of Kogi State. Specifically, the study investigated the effects of sexual abuse among church youths and examined practical strategies that could reduce its occurrence. The findings are expected to provide useful information for church leaders, parents, educators, counsellors, policymakers, and community stakeholders involved in youth development and child protection.

Research Objectives

The main objective of this study will be to assess sexual abuse among youths in selected churches in the Igala community of Kogi State, Nigeria. Specifically, the study will seek to:

1. determine the perceived effects of sexual abuse among youths in selected churches in the Igala community of Kogi State.
2. identify the strategies that could be adopted to reduce the incidence of sexual abuse among youths in selected churches in the Igala community of Kogi State.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide the study:

1. What are the perceived effects of sexual abuse among youths in selected churches in the Igala community of Kogi State?
2. What strategies can be adopted to reduce the incidence of sexual abuse among youths in

selected churches in the Igala community of Kogi State?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were tested at the 0.05 level of significance:

H_{01}: There is no significant effect of sexual abuse among youths in selected churches in the Igala community of Kogi State.

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between the proposed preventive measures and the reduction of sexual abuse among youths in selected churches.

Statement of the Problem

Sexual abuse remains a serious social, moral, psychological, and public health concern among young people. Although churches are traditionally regarded as institutions for moral instruction, spiritual development, character formation, and guidance, youths within church communities may still be exposed to sexual abuse and other forms of sexual exploitation. The occurrence of such experiences can have serious consequences for the physical, psychological, emotional, social, moral, and spiritual development of young people. Within the Igala community of Kogi State, strong cultural and religious values traditionally emphasise chastity, self-discipline, respect for human dignity, and responsible interpersonal relationships. However, changing social conditions, increased access to the internet and social media, exposure to sexually explicit materials, peer influence, inadequate parental supervision, and weakening family structures may increase the vulnerability of youths to sexual abuse. The presence of religious teachings alone may therefore not be sufficient to protect young people from sexual exploitation and related risky behaviours.

The problem is further compounded by the consequences associated with sexual abuse. Young people who experience sexual abuse may be exposed to sexually transmitted infections, anxiety and fear, psychological trauma, irresponsible sexual behaviour, loss of dignity, social withdrawal, and other forms of emotional and psychological distress. These consequences may negatively affect their relationships, education, moral development, and overall well-being. The existing findings of this study confirm that respondents perceived anxiety and fear, sexually transmitted infections, psychological trauma, promiscuity and irresponsibility, and degradation of human dignity as important consequences of sexual abuse among youths in selected churches. Despite these concerns, there appears to be a need for greater attention to practical and contextually relevant strategies for preventing sexual abuse among youths in church communities. Measures such as comprehensive sexuality education, careful peer-group selection, practising chastity and moral discipline, maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships, and avoiding sexually explicit videos and music were identified by respondents as important preventive strategies. However, the effectiveness of such measures needs to be given systematic attention within the context of the Igala community. The central problem, therefore, is that sexual abuse continues to pose a threat to the holistic development and well-being of youths even within religious communities where moral and spiritual teachings are expected to provide protection against sexual misconduct. There is consequently a need to assess the perceived effects of sexual abuse and identify strategies that could contribute to reducing its incidence among youths in selected churches in the Igala community of Kogi State. It is against this background that this study will assess sexual abuse among youths in selected churches in the Igala community of Kogi State, with particular attention to its perceived effects and possible preventive strategies.

Concept of Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse refers to any unwanted sexual act, behaviour, or contact imposed on an individual through coercion, manipulation, intimidation, deception, or abuse of authority. It includes rape, sexual harassment, molestation, exploitation, incest, forced exposure to pornography, and other forms of non-consensual sexual activities (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). According to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2023), sexual abuse involves every form of sexual exploitation that violates an individual's dignity, bodily integrity, and fundamental human rights. Victims often experience long-term psychological distress, emotional instability, social isolation, and impaired educational or occupational outcomes. Researchers have also identified sexual abuse as a multidimensional social problem influenced by individual, family, community, cultural, and environmental factors. Adolescents are particularly vulnerable because of developmental changes, peer influence, inadequate sexuality education, and increased exposure to digital media (Okeke & Eze, 2022).

Sexual Abuse among Youths

Youth represents a transitional period characterised by rapid physical, emotional, cognitive, and social development. During this stage, young people become increasingly susceptible to risky behaviours resulting from peer influence, curiosity, poor parental supervision, substance abuse, and unrestricted internet exposure (UNESCO, 2021). Recent studies indicate that adolescents who experience sexual abuse frequently develop depression, anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder, poor academic achievement, substance dependence, and suicidal ideation. They may also exhibit behavioural problems including aggression, truancy, promiscuity, and social withdrawal (WHO, 2022).

Causes of Sexual Abuse among Youths

Current literature identifies several factors contributing to sexual abuse among adolescents:

- Poor parental supervision
- Negative peer influence
- Substance and alcohol abuse
- Exposure to pornography and social media
- Poverty and economic vulnerability
- Weak moral and religious guidance
- Lack of comprehensive sexuality education
- Gender inequality and abuse of authority

Studies conducted in Nigeria have consistently shown that peer pressure and unrestricted internet exposure remain major predictors of risky sexual behaviour among adolescents (Adebayo & Ibrahim, 2023; Okeke & Eze, 2022).

Effects of Sexual Abuse

The consequences of sexual abuse are multidimensional and may persist throughout adulthood. Victims commonly experience:

- Psychological trauma
- Anxiety and depression
- Sexually transmitted infections

- Unwanted pregnancy
- Low self-esteem
- Educational disruption
- Social stigma
- Spiritual distress

These effects may negatively influence interpersonal relationships, mental health, and overall quality of life.

Preventive Strategies

Evidence-based interventions recommended in recent literature include:

- Comprehensive sexuality education
- Parent-child communication on sexuality
- Youth counselling services
- Faith-based moral education
- Community awareness programmes
- Digital safety education
- Strengthened child protection policies
- Peer mentoring and youth empowerment programmes

Collaborative efforts involving parents, churches, schools, government agencies, and community organisations have been found to be the most effective approach to preventing sexual abuse among young people (UNICEF, 2023; UNESCO, 2021)

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on **Social Learning Theory** developed by **Albert Bandura (1977)**. The theory explains that human behaviour is acquired through observation, imitation, modelling, and reinforcement. Young people learn behaviours by observing parents, peers, religious leaders, media personalities, and other influential individuals within their social environment. The theory is particularly relevant because sexual attitudes and behaviours among youths are often shaped by peer influence, family practices, media exposure, and religious teachings. Exposure to inappropriate sexual content, permissive peer groups, or abusive role models may increase the likelihood of risky sexual behaviour, while positive role models and effective sexuality education can promote healthy behavioural outcomes. Consequently, Social Learning Theory provides an appropriate framework for explaining both the occurrence of sexual abuse and the importance of preventive interventions such as sexuality education, parental supervision, and moral instruction within church settings.

Methodology

This study adopted a **descriptive survey research design**. The design was considered appropriate because it enabled the researchers to obtain information from respondents regarding the effects of sexual abuse among youths in selected churches within the Igala community of Kogi State and to identify possible strategies for reducing its occurrence. The study was conducted in selected churches located within the **Igala-speaking communities of Kogi State, Nigeria**. The area comprises several Local Government Areas where Christianity constitutes one of the dominant religions and churches play

significant roles in youth development and moral instruction. The target population consisted of **4,863 registered members** drawn from four selected Christian denominations in the study area. A sample of **400 respondents** was selected for the study. A **cluster sampling technique** was first used to select the participating church denominations, after which **simple random sampling** was employed to select respondents from each denomination to ensure equal opportunity for participation. Data were collected using a structured questionnaire titled **Assessment of Sexual Abuse among Youths Questionnaire (ASYQ)**. A criterion mean of **2.50** served as the decision benchmark. Mean scores of **2.50 and above** were interpreted as agreement with an item, whereas scores below **2.50** indicated disagreement. The questionnaire was subjected to **face and content validation** by experts in Educational Research and Measurement as well as specialists in Social Science Education. Their observations guided the revision of ambiguous items before final administration. The researchers personally administered the questionnaires with the assistance of trained research assistants. Respondents were adequately briefed on the purpose of the study, and confidentiality of responses was assured. The research questions were answered using **mean statistics**, while the hypotheses were tested using the **Chi-square (χ^2) statistic** at the **0.05 level of significance**.

Research Question 1

What are the effects of sexual abuse among youths in selected churches in the Igala community of Kogi State?

Table 1

Mean Ratings of Respondents on the Effects of Sexual Abuse among Youths

S/N	Item	Mean	Decision
1	Promiscuity and irresponsibility	2.78	Accepted
2	Psychological trauma	3.02	Accepted
3	Risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases	3.50	Accepted
4	Degradation of human dignity	2.62	Accepted
5	Anxiety and fear	3.67	Accepted

Decision Rule: Mean ≥ 2.50 = Accepted.

The results indicate that respondents generally agreed that sexual abuse has serious consequences for youths within the church. The highest-rated effects were the **risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases (M = 3.50)** and **anxiety and fear (M = 3.67)**. Psychological trauma and promiscuity were also perceived as important consequences, while degradation of human dignity, although rated comparatively lower, remained above the acceptance benchmark.

Research Question 2

What strategies can reduce the incidence of sexual abuse among youths in selected churches?

Table 2

Mean Ratings of Respondents on Strategies for Preventing Sexual Abuse

S/N	Preventive Strategy	Mean	Decision
1	Comprehensive sexuality education	3.00	Accepted
2	Careful peer-group selection	3.20	Accepted
3	Practising chastity and moral discipline	3.40	Accepted
4	Maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships	3.71	Accepted

S/N	Preventive Strategy	Mean	Decision
5	Avoiding sexually explicit videos and music	3.80	Accepted

Decision Rule: Mean ≥ 2.50 = Accepted.

Respondents agreed that all the proposed preventive measures could reduce the incidence of sexual abuse among church youths. The highest-rated strategy was **avoiding sexually explicit videos and music (M = 3.80)**, followed by **maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships (M = 3.71)** and **practising chastity (M = 3.40)**.

Hypothesis One

H_{01}: There is no significant effect of sexual abuse among youths in selected churches in the Igala community of Kogi State.

Table 3

Chi-square Test of the Effects of Sexual Abuse

Variable	χ^2 Calculated	χ^2 Critical	df	α	Decision
Effects of sexual abuse	4.41	3.84	1	0.05	Reject H_0

Since the calculated Chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 4.41$) exceeded the critical value ($\chi^2 = 3.84$) at **df = 1** and **α = .05**, the null hypothesis was rejected. The result indicates that respondents perceived the effects of sexual abuse among youths in selected churches as statistically significant.

Hypothesis Two

H_{02}: There is no significant relationship between the proposed preventive measures and the reduction of sexual abuse among youths in selected churches.

Table 4

Chi-square Test of Preventive Strategies

Variable	χ^2 Calculated	χ^2 Critical	df	α	Decision
Preventive strategies	15.21	3.84	1	0.05	Reject H_0

The calculated Chi-square value ($\chi^2 = 15.21$) was greater than the critical value ($\chi^2 = 3.84$) at the **0.05 significance level**. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected.

The findings suggest that respondents considered the identified preventive strategies to be significantly associated with reducing the incidence of sexual abuse among youths in selected churches in the Igala community.

Discussion of Findings

The present study assessed sexual abuse among youths in selected churches within the Igala community of Kogi State. The findings demonstrate that sexual abuse remains a significant social and moral challenge affecting young people in church settings. Respondents perceived sexual abuse as having serious psychological, emotional, social, and health consequences. These findings are consistent with recent empirical studies which have identified sexual abuse as a major public health concern with long-term implications for victims' mental health, educational attainment, interpersonal relationships, and overall well-being. The first finding revealed that respondents agreed that sexual abuse exposes youths

to sexually transmitted infections, psychological trauma, anxiety, fear, irresponsibility, and degradation of human dignity. Among these, anxiety and fear recorded the highest mean rating, followed closely by the risk of contracting sexually transmitted infections. This finding agrees with the report of the **World Health Organization (2022)**, which identified anxiety disorders, depression, post-traumatic stress disorder, sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, and poor psychosocial adjustment as common consequences of sexual abuse among adolescents. Similarly, **UNICEF (2023)** reported that survivors of sexual abuse often experience emotional distress, social withdrawal, loss of self-esteem, and difficulties in trusting others throughout adulthood. The findings are also consistent with the work of **Adebayo and Ibrahim (2023)**, who observed that Nigerian adolescents exposed to sexual abuse frequently experience psychological instability, poor academic performance, and behavioural challenges. Likewise, **Okeke and Eze (2022)** found that victims often suffer long-lasting emotional trauma and diminished social functioning.

The implication is that sexual abuse extends far beyond physical harm. It affects the holistic development of young people by disrupting their emotional stability, educational progress, spiritual growth, and social relationships. Churches, therefore, have an important responsibility to establish effective child protection policies, counselling services, and youth education programmes that promote healthy sexual behaviour and provide appropriate support for survivors. The second finding indicated that respondents considered avoiding sexually explicit videos and music, maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships, practising chastity, selecting positive peer groups, and comprehensive sexuality education as effective strategies for reducing sexual abuse among youths. The highest-rated preventive strategy was avoiding sexually explicit media, followed by maintaining healthy interpersonal relationships. This finding supports recent studies which suggest that unrestricted exposure to sexually explicit online content contributes significantly to risky sexual behaviour among adolescents. The result corroborates the findings of **UNESCO (2021)**, which concluded that comprehensive sexuality education enables adolescents to make informed decisions, resist sexual coercion, and recognise abusive behaviours. Similarly, **WHO (2022)** emphasized that sexuality education, parental supervision, and community-based interventions significantly reduce adolescents' vulnerability to sexual exploitation.

Recent Nigerian studies by **Adebayo and Ibrahim (2023)** also reported that adolescents who receive adequate parental guidance and sexuality education demonstrate lower involvement in risky sexual behaviours compared with their counterparts lacking such support. The present finding further supports **Bandura's Social Learning Theory**, which explains that adolescents learn behaviours through observation and interaction with their social environment. Positive role models within families, churches, schools, and peer groups therefore contribute significantly to healthy behavioural development.

Test of Hypotheses

The Chi-square analysis revealed statistically significant perceptions regarding both the effects of sexual abuse and the proposed preventive strategies. Consequently, both null hypotheses were rejected. The statistical outcome suggests that respondents strongly acknowledged the seriousness of sexual abuse among church youths and agreed that appropriate educational, parental, religious, and community interventions could substantially reduce its occurrence. Overall, the findings reinforce growing evidence from international and Nigerian studies that preventing sexual abuse requires collaborative efforts involving families, religious institutions, schools, healthcare professionals, community organisations, and government agencies.

Conclusion

This study assessed sexual abuse among youths in selected churches within the Igala community of Kogi State. The findings revealed that sexual abuse remains a significant challenge affecting the psychological, emotional, moral, social, and spiritual development of young people. Respondents identified sexually transmitted infections, anxiety, fear, psychological trauma, and irresponsible behaviour as major consequences associated with sexual abuse. The study further established that comprehensive sexuality education, healthy interpersonal relationships, careful peer-group selection, moral discipline, and avoidance of sexually explicit media constitute important preventive strategies for reducing the incidence of sexual abuse among church youths. The significant Chi-square results further confirmed respondents' perceptions regarding both the effects of sexual abuse and the effectiveness of the identified preventive measures.

The study therefore concludes that reducing sexual abuse among youths requires sustained collaboration among churches, parents, schools, counsellors, community leaders, and government agencies. Faith-based institutions should complement spiritual teachings with evidence-based sexuality education and child protection programmes to promote safer environments for young people.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. Church leaders should integrate age-appropriate sexuality education into youth fellowship programmes to improve awareness of sexual abuse and its consequences.
2. Parents should strengthen communication with their children on issues relating to sexuality, personal safety, healthy relationships, and responsible decision-making.
3. Churches should establish confidential counselling and reporting mechanisms to support victims of sexual abuse and encourage timely reporting of abuse cases.
4. Youths should be encouraged to associate with positive peer groups that promote moral values, self-discipline, and responsible behaviour.
5. Religious organisations should collaborate with schools, healthcare professionals, counsellors, and community-based organisations to organise regular awareness campaigns on child protection and sexual abuse prevention.

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