

Prostitution; An Avenue for Criminal Activities, the Case of Pokuase in Accra-Ghana

Nyarko Daniel Ofori, Ayettey Benjamin Obido

Institute of African Studies, University of Ghana

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.803200S>

Received: 21 June 2024; Revised: 08 July 2024; Accepted: 13 July 2024; Published: 21 August 2024

ABSTRACT

Commercial sex work and commercial sex workers face high level of discrimination and stigmatisation where ever they find themselves. The discrimination and stigmatization against commercial sex workers has made certain criminals and criminal acts to feed on commercial sex work and commercial sex joints to thrive. This research was conducted in Pokuase a suburb of the Ga North Municipality in Accra, Ghana. The objective of the researchers was to identify certain criminal activities that thrive or feed on commercial sex work or commercial sex joints. The researchers used qualitative research methodology involving interviews and focus group discussion to solicit for information or data. The information or data collected from the interviewees and focus group discussants were transcribed and organized into themes. The researcher found that certain criminal activities that thrive on commercial sex work and commercial sex joints include; quack medical service provisions, drug peddling, armed robbery, human and drug trafficking, organized pimping and extortion of money from commercial sex workers. The researchers concluded that, due to the criminalization of prostitution, many criminals have gotten involved in the entire commercial sex profession as a means of sustaining their criminal activities. Also, people who are engaged in legal businesses are now also using such businesses to commit crimes against these commercial sex workers since their profession is criminalized by the state and stigmatized by the public. The researchers finally recommended that the state must amend the laws criminalizing prostitution so that commercial sex workers can report some crimes and criminal acts that feed on their profession to the police. Also, religious bodies and non-governmental organisations must be involved in changing the perception, stigmatization and marginalization of commercial sex workers within the societies they find themselves.

Keywords; Commercial sex work, Crime, Prostitution, Trafficking, Pimping

INTRODUCTION

Prostitution which is the commonly associated name to commercial sex work is a major criminalized human, social and economic activity throughout history (Sociology of Prostitution Research, 2015). Right from the beginning of human society, prostitutes or commercial sex workers have faced strong opposition, marginalization, stigmatization, seclusion, stereotyped and prejudice irrespective of the society, nation or state in which they find themselves ((Barry and Yuill, 2008, Costello, 2003 and Hands Off, 2017). Advanced countries like New Zealand, Australia, Denmark, the Netherlands, Austria, Germany, France and other Western countries as well as Senegal in Africa once criminalized prostitution before accepting, decriminalizing, legalizing and regulating the activities of commercial sex workers. The poor acceptance, exclusion and further marginalization of commercial sex workers have made many criminals to tie their criminal activities to commercial sex work hence using commercial sex work and sex workers as footbridges and launch pads for perpetrating criminal activities (Jackson et al., 2010; Dibb et al., 2006 and Zimmerman et al. 2006). Such criminal activities include; human trafficking as well as drug trafficking and

pimping. Commercial sex work in even advanced countries where commercial sex activities are decriminalized, controlled and regulated still find criminals using commercial sex work as a conduit of carrying out other criminal activities (Zimmerman et al. 2006).

The researchers define commercial sex work as a process whereby people benefit from monetary and other material gains through the offering of one's body for sexual or erotic purposes from their clients who are always prepared to compensate such individuals with money. Commercial sex work in contemporary times is becoming a global affair as commercial sex joints are springing out just as fast-food joints. According to the researchers, the springing out of commercial sex joints across the globe can be equated to pizza huts which are now found in almost every corner around the globe. UNAIDS in 2011, defined sex work as "the provision of sexual services for money or good" whiles commercial sex is "the exchange of money or goods for sexual services" and sex workers are the "people who receive money or goods in exchange for sexual services, and who consciously define those activities as income generating even if they do not consider sex work as their occupation".

LITERATURE REVIEW

Commercial sex work or prostitution has become a major global business channel used by many people including males, females and transgendered as a means of economic survival. In the commercial sex industry, though males, females and transgenders are service providers to clients, majority of them are females as service providers (Scambler, 2007 and UK NSWP, 2008). Many prostitutes or commercial sex workers get involved in this profession for several reasons. According to literature the reasons why many people get involved in offering sex or sexual and erotic services for monetary compensation or gains include, trafficking, unemployment, broken homes, divorce, academic expenses and to finance drugs and other illicit life styles (Pitcher, 2015; Roberts et al., 2010; Karkov, 2012; Scambler, 2007 and Jeal et al., 2004).

Commercial sex work has now become a major absorbing profession for females, transgenders and males at both the domestic and international levels. The growth in the participation of commercial sex work has gradually also increased global sex tourism which is an avenue of promoting commercial sex work especially in Latin America and South East Asia in countries including Ecuador, El-Salvador, Jamaica, Brazil, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam. African countries are also gradually becoming destination for sex tourism. Countries in Africa including Cape Verde, Senegal, Gambia and South Africa are gradually becoming emerging markets and destinations for sex tourists especially those from the global north countries.

Commercial sex work or prostitution due to stereotype and marginalization by societies and nations-states has led to many types of prostitution usually classified into four. These four main types are as follows; escort prostitution, brothel prostitution, client's prostitution and street soliciting prostitution. In spite of the four main classification of prostitution, there is a conflation of these four types giving impetus to more than twenty-five types of prostitution globally. In spite of the many forms of prostitution, (Harcourt and Donovan, 2005) categorizes prostitution into two which are direct and indirect prostitution. The direct prostitution basically involves the direct contact of sex organs whereas the indirect prostitution does not involve the services of direct contact of sex organs of commercial sex workers and their clients but may include virtual sexual pleasure and physical erotic activities including lap dancing and stripping (Harcourt and Donovan, 2005).

The global nature of commercial sex work or prostitution has led to many investments into brothels, hostels, hotels, bars, restaurants and many entertainment facilities established to attract commercial sex workers and their clients. Due to the massive investments into avenues that give impetus to commercial sex work and

joints, many criminals have also gotten themselves involved in the supply chain of commercial sex work including human traffickers, pimps, bouncers as well as drug traffickers and peddlers. (Jeal et al., 2004; Jeal et al., 2008, Brown, 2013, Church et al. 2001, Home Office 2004). The booming nature of the global commercial sex trade has also even made certain legal service providers such as taxi drivers, accommodation providers and restaurant and bar operators to engage in certain illegal activities meant to sustain commercial sex workers or commercial joints. In doing so, currently certain legal and illegal activities now sustain themselves at the backdrop of commercial sex activities or commercial joints internationally.

THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

From the literature on commercial sex work, certain criminal activities feed on commercial sex work or joints for their self-sustenance and progress. This made the researchers to adopt this research topic hence the purpose of the study is for the researchers to identify and discuss certain criminal activities which thrive on or sustain itself through commercial sex work or commercial sex joints.

THE STUDY LOCATION AND METHOD OF THE STUDY

This study was carried out at Pokuase in the Ga North Municipality of the Greater Accra Region which is a suburb of Accra in Ghana. The commercial sex joint or market in Pokuase is located around a popular foot bridge that links a timber market, two bus stops and taxi stations. There is a thriving commercial sex market of Ghanaians and foreigners at the place described. This commercial sex joint is right along the Nsawam-Accra Highway attracting many clients to the services of these commercial sex workers. The Pokuase commercial sex joint or market does not have brothels but rather certain individuals who act as bouncers and pimps have erected makeshift structures with student mattresses on which clients to these commercial sex workers are served. Commercial sex workers at this joint operate under poor environment and sanitation conditions.

Qualitative research methodology was used in this study. the data collections tools employed in this study are focus group discussions and interviews (Creswell, 2013). In this study, a total of twenty participants were recruited. The researchers recruited these twenty commercial sex workers through convenient sampling while they were at their usual commercial sex market or joint soliciting for clients. The researchers approached these twenty commercial sex workers and informed them of their research intentions. Upon informing these commercial sex workers of the research topic, they agreed to participate in the research though a number of other commercial sex workers declined to participate with the fear that the researchers are police detectives and would later come and arrest them or raid their joint.

The interviews were not conducted at the commercial sex joint where these commercial sex workers solicit for clients but were conducted at places chosen by these commercial sex workers for their safety from their bouncers and pimps. The interviews were conducted in spots, restaurants and chop bars in Pokuase. The Ages of these commercial sex workers for the interviews ranged between 20 and 30 years. These commercial sex workers were all women. After interviewing the twenty commercial sex workers for the study, the researchers also recruited ten other commercial sex workers for focus group discussions. Two focus group discussions were organized at a popular spot outside the commercial sex market or joint. There were five members in each of the two focus group discussions. The composition of the focus group discussion were Four Ghanaians and one Nigerians in the first group and three Nigerians and two Ghanaians in the second group. The Ages of the focus group discussants ranged between 18 and 30 years. Both the focus group discussions and the interviews were carried out through the use of the English language and Twi a popular and common Ghanaian dialect.

Qualitative research methodology was used in this study to ensure that, information from the research participants are their lived experiences and participants are treated as equal partners in knowledge production (Holly & Lousley, 2014 and Walia, 2015). The focus group discussion was conducted as a follow up to the interviews to promote corroboration and complementarity of information provided by the interviewees (the commercial sex workers) and vice versa. The interviews and focus group discussions were recorded by using a voice recorder as well as the researchers' taking field notes during the data collection process. After the interviews and focus group discussions, the data information from the interviews and focus group discussions were transcribe and coded into themes. The themes derived from coding the data formed the basis for the researchers' analysis (Braun et al., 2006 and Miles et al., 1994). The researcher used pseudonyms to represent the names of both the interviewees and focus group discussants in this study.

ANALYSIS OF DATA AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Based on the lived experiences and the information provided by the interviewees and focus group discussants, the researchers' findings and discussions are based on the themes developed out of the data collection process.

Quack medical provision

Quack medical provision is a major criminal practice that is feeding on prostitution or commercial sex work to thrive. Most commercial sex workers or prostitute are highly stigmatized by society and other professionals so most of these prostitutes are unable to attend to medical facilities used by the general public for the medical challenges they face. According to interviewees and focus group discussants of this study, sometimes they are ignored based on the health challenges they faced once medical practitioners such as nurses, paramedics and doctors get to know they are commercial sex worker. The way commercial sex workers are treated by medical practitioners and medical service providers makes commercial sex workers desperate to look for medical treatments for their health challenges hence giving impetus for quack medical service providers in attempting to assist these commercial sex workers for their desperate health care and cure. This finding is in line with the following studies in Britain and other parts of Europe where commercial sex workers per discrimination, stigmatization and marginalization are not able to seek health provision from national health service providers but rather resorting to underground medical services (Cusick and Berney, 2005; UK NSWP, 2009; Rekart, 2005; Surratt et al., 2005).

In an interview with Susan, this is what she said *“when you complain about sores and itchy private part (vagina) then the nurses begin to ask you numerous questions. Once they get to know you are a commercial sex worker, you are stigmatized and even refuse to attend to you on your next visit”*.

During the focus discussion Amanda retorted that *“the nature of health issues we have as occupational hazards is not for private hospitals or herbal practitioners to treat but when you go to the government hospital every time complaining about certain sexually related diseases, nurses begin to ignore you and treat you as if you are not a human being. So anytime I have problems such as unpleasant discharge from my sexual organ (vagina) or any of my friends, there is a private hospital we visit, though we see no other people there except our own commercial sex work friends which we do not trust the doctors but they are always at our service so we have been managing”*.

These quack medical doctors also perform illegal abortion for some of these commercial sex workers who fortunately or unfortunately get pregnant in the course of performing their professional duties. Most of these commercial sex workers make bigger sum of money when they have unprotected sex with their clients hence are sometimes impregnated. Once some of these commercial sex workers are impregnated, the premium placed on them in their professional careers diminishes hence they attempt aborting thereby

resorting to these quack medical practitioners. Sometimes some of these commercial sex workers do lose their lives after going through abortion from these quack health service providers.

During one of the focus group discussions, Chioma who is a Nigerian commercial sex worker had this to say *“our work is seen and considered as illegal so when our members even die after going through abortions in the hands of these quack health providers, we are not able to report to the police. I know two of my Nigerian sisters who have died after going through abortion from these our quack medical providers after two days”*.

Drug peddling

Drug peddling is also a major criminal activity which is thriving on prostitution to reach out to their target population in commercial sex joints and markets. In the interviews and focus group discussions, the researcher realized from the interviewees and focus group discussants that where they solicit for clients and their hide out is also used by drug pushers who sell illegal and illicit drugs to commercial sex workers as well as other target groups. Drug pushers and peddlers who supply Indian hemp, crack cocaine and cocaine ice as well as illicit and criminalized drugs such as tramadol have specific spots within commercial sex markets or joints, they sell these drugs. Sometimes these drug pushers sell to commercial sex workers for coping with the hazards and stress of their work but the majority of their consumers are not commercial sex workers. Sometimes certain individuals also possess as female commercial sex workers who are soliciting for clients but rather are men who have disguised themselves to provide or distribute drugs to their clients at where commercial sex workers mostly stand in the night at Pokuase. This finding also posits well with (Jeal et al., 2004; Jeal et al., 2008, Brown, 2013, Church et al. 2001, Home Office 2004) where their studies revealed that commercial sex workers are one group of people who cope with their work through the use of drugs. Commercial sex workers sometimes use the money earned from their services to finance the consumption and dependence on drugs including cocaine, heroin and injectables thereby making commercial sex joints a good market for drug pushers, drug carriers, drug peddlers and drug traffickers.

Elizabeth has this to say *“our work is criminalised but we do it every day so all other illegal workers also use our joints as a common stadium to also play their games on our field especially cocaine dealers. Most of them are our friends and clients and you know drug money is free so they even pay us better when they come for our commercial sex services”*.

During the focus group discussions, Amanda had this to say *“our joint has more bitters sellers in this small place than certain suburbs in other parts of Accra and by 5am, all the bitters are finished. These bitters sellers use Indian hemp, tramadol or other illicit drugs for the preparation of these concoction and our joint is their main market where they sell because we are their market targets. Even sometimes national security patrol personnel such as the police and military come here to take some”*.

Safe haven for criminals

According to the interviewees and focus group discussants commercial sex joints provide safe haven for criminals, as people who are on the wanted list of national security find solace in commercial sex markets or commercial sex joints. Due to the marginalization of commercial sex workers by the public, members mostly align or associate very well with other marginalized and secluded individual in the eyes of the public hence criminals who are wanted and those who have complete their jail sentences use commercial sex joints as their places of hang out to plan other criminal acts to perpetrate against the public. Some of these criminals who use commercial sex joints as their hideout usually turn themselves into bouncers and protection and protective agents for commercial sex workers.

According to Belinda *“our commercial sex joint attract many criminals especially in the night to use our joint as a place of enjoyment as over here everything criminal can be purchased or acquired. Most people*

after committing crime or been released from jail will come here. When the criminals are here, we all feel at home since none will expose the other to be arrested as we are all criminalised by the laws of this country”.

Armed robbery and Murder

Armed robbery and Murder are also major criminal activities that thrives at the expense of commercial sex workers at the commercial sex market or joints. From the interviews and the focus group discussions conducted, the researcher realized that some of the people who are dressed and standing in commercial sex markets or joints as if they are soliciting for clients are actually armed robbing rings. Sometimes members of these armed robbing rings posse as taxi drivers who transport the commercial sex workers and their customers or clients home especially when these commercial sex workers are to render sleep services to their clients. Sometimes these commercial sex workers upon entering the houses of their clients releases information to their armed robbery rings to rob such clients or whiles going home in the taxi will organize and throw such clients out of the taxi and rob them of their personal effects such as phones and money. In other instances, some men who posse as commercial sex workers hide behind to rob taxi drivers under the pretext of hiring these drivers to tax them from their joints to service their clients who call them for home service. Ritualists and murders have also taken advantage of commercial sex workers as they are usually in their midst soliciting for clients which leads to ritual murder or missing of some of the commercial sex workers in their routine service to clients. This finding is in line with (Boff, 2012) who found in Europe that commercial sex workers are more likely to experience one form of crime or another in the course of their work.

During the focus group discussions, three discussants said *“almost every year some of our people are murdered or robbed and the perpetrators are in our midst. There are many criminals who are in our midst who are spoiling our job but who are you to reveal their identity and whom are you to reveal to. Taxi drivers who provide us with transport services are sometimes robbed and even shot as well, where do you think these robbers are coming from, they are part of us or with us, they pretend to be bouncers and protectionist for us but they know why they are here”.*

Human trafficking and pimping

Human trafficking and pimping are also certain crimes and criminal activities which the researchers discovered through the focus group discussions and interviews conducted as part of the data collection of this research. From the information gathered, sometimes some of the commercial sex workers especially the foreigners have masters who bring them to come and work at their joint at Pokuase. These commercial sex workers are sometimes to work to settle their debt to the masters who bring them to the country for four to six months before they are freed. In meeting daily targets to their traffickers, some of the under-age prostitutes are subjected to several rounds of sexual ordeals daily in the aim of gaining their freedom from indebtedness to their masters. The act of organizing women and girls into prostitution is now becoming the profession of certain groups of individuals who earn their living out of the services trafficked commercial sex workers render through soliciting for clients. At times families and relations of these trafficked victims are also complicit in the criminal offences against these trafficked commercial sex workers. This finding is similar to (Bindel et al., 2012 Jackson, et al., 2010; Mai, 2009; Zimmerman et al., 2006) where they found in Austria, Britain, Germany and other parts of Europe that commercial sex workers suffer a lot of ordeals from traffickers including the denial of freedom of movement to bodily harms and death threats.

According to Chioma *“she came to Ghana under the pretext of going to Dubai according to her madam to take care of a business. She later found herself in Ghana in the company of other girls from Nigeria who are into commercial sex work hence she needed to work as a commercial sex provider to pay her madam a fee of US\$1, 500 (one thousand and five hundred dollars) just like any of the Nigerian girls under her madam to*

gain her freedom.

Cassandra had this to say “formerly *commercial sex work was for people above 20 years but these days we have Nigerians who are less than 18 years participating in commercial sex work in Ghana and are controlled by a group of men who act as their bouncers and pimps controlling their money and regulating what they can do and cannot do*”.

Extortionist practices

Extortions are also illegal means through which certain people who render legal services to commercial sex workers use to drain the pockets of these commercial sex workers. For instance, brothel, hotel and hostel owners who provide room and accommodation services charge illegal fees which are not allowed. Beside charging fees that are not allowed, hotel, brothel and hostel owners as well as certain landlords are complicit in allowing their facilities to be used by commercial sex workers, traffickers or pimps to trade in sex in their facilities. Even certain bars and restaurant operators also allow their facilities to be used by commercial sex workers to solicit for clients which are complete forms of routine activity (Cohen and Felson 1979). According to the Routine Activity theory, sometimes certain criminal activities thrive on legal activities due to the absence of a possible guardian within space and time and through a motivated offender and identified possible target. In this instance, accommodation providers to commercial sex workers have become motivator offenders since they know their facilities are prohibited by law to promote trafficking, pimping and commercial sex work but these traffickers, pimps and commercial sex workers have become identified victims for these accommodation providers to extort unusual rent charges from them. Police officers who are also to support and ensure the enforcement of the laws against prostitution have also used the commercial sex joint at Pokuase as a means of extorting money from these commercial sex workers as sometimes commercial sex workers who are arrested are made to pay money as bribes. These police officers have some of their colleagues being friends with bouncers, pimps, traffickers, alcohol sellers and other criminal rings who use commercial sex joints to nurture and perpetrate criminal activities.

In one of the focus group discussions, the five discussants all came out openly by saying “*rent around our joint is very expensive and that more guest houses, brothels, hostels and hotels are springing out around our joint since we pay good money. The accommodation providers are aware that our work is criminal per the laws of the country so they take so much money from us since they know we are making cheap and illegal money through our work and we cannot also report them per the nature of the work we do*”.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the criminalization of prostitution or commercial sex services in Ghana, many criminals hide behind commercial sex work to perpetrate crime against commercial sex workers and the general public. These criminals who are involved in the commercial sex work are committing dangerous crimes by hiding behind commercial sex work joints and commercial sex workers. The criminal activities committed by certain individuals in the midst of commercial sex work and commercial sex joints affect the safety of commercial sex workers, their clients and other individuals connected to their services including taxi drivers. Crimes such as drug peddling, drug trafficking, armed robbery, human trafficking and pimping amongst others are feeding on commercial sex work to thrive.

Individuals such as accommodation providers as well as personnel from the security services through routine activities of rendering their lawful services perpetrate injustice and crimes against commercial sex workers such as extorting money from them, charging unapproved and illegal rent fees, harassing commercial sex workers, beating commercial sex workers and even sometimes detaining commercial sex workers beyond the 48 hours as recommended by the laws of Ghana.

The researchers prescribe the following as recommendations;

Laws criminalizing prostitution in Ghana has to be amended so that these commercial sex workers can be used as informants to arrest certain criminals and perpetrators of social vices within the commercial sex work such as human and drug traffickers, ritual murderers, armed robbers and other criminals who are industrial players in the commercial sex business.

Religious bodies and non-governmental organisations must help to change societies perception and continual marginalization of commercial sex workers so that these commercial sex workers can confide in certain individuals to expose some of the atrocities perpetrated against them. Crimes perpetrated by criminal gangs within commercial sex joints such as human and drug trafficking, pimping, robbing and others negatively affect the fundamental human rights of these commercial sex workers

The police service must rather use their institution to conduct surveillance and investigations to arrest criminals such as murderers, drug and human traffickers and pimps who are involved in the commercial sex trade or work than rather targeting the commercial sex workers alone as the activities of these criminals also give impetus to the commercial sex work or joint to thrive. There are more dangerous criminal activities that feed on commercial sex work to thrive than commercial sex work itself hence these crimes and criminals must be the targets of the law enforcement agencies than the commercial sex workers themselves.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest in this publication

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