

Onitsha sex market

- Pregnant women, mothers & daughters involved

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Photo: Sun News Publishing

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It was a Sunday evening, a supposedly holy day for Christians. Traditionally, the major markets are closed in Onitsha, the commercial capital of Anambra State in South East Nigeria, and it is either a visiting day for the city dwellers or time to attend town union meetings. It is also a day to unwind at the various drinking joints.

Time was 6:45pm and this reporter was at the Lagos Park bypass near the Chisco Park to investigate an already conceived script from enquiries about some areas of the city, inhabited by women of easy virtue.

Dusk was gradually kissing the day goodbye and the area was bustling with a flurry of activities. Commercial cyclists (Okada) and motorists honked their horns while music blasted from the loud speakers of a nearby record store. Everyone seemed in a hurry either to get home or to complete other tasks before nightfall.

Travellers were boarding the night buses to Lagos even as motor park touts scouted for more passengers. This reporter sat on a plastic chair at Mama Nkechi's kiosk where the middle-aged woman sold all kinds of spirits, local concoctions, kola and gin after getting her permission under the pretence that I was waiting for a brother traveling to Lagos that night.

While fiddling with my phone, the reporter's "third" eye was also fixed on an unfolding scene nearby. Two young ladies clutching leather handbags and another black polythene bag popularly known as 'walkie-talkie' suddenly appeared from the opposite direction, near the Chisco Park toilet. They briefly exchanged pleasantries, scanned the environment and walked towards a lock-up stall painted in a popular noodles wrapper's colour and began fiddling with their phones. Soon after, other ladies joined them.

One of them approached the Chisco Park gate and pretended to hang around when a man, probably in his late 50s, emerged from inside and handed her a big sack tied with a rope. She took the bag to the lock-up stall and in a jiffy, the other ladies helped her untie it and they used it to create an emergency room in front of the stall. Within seconds, two young men appeared carrying double wooden benches, which the ladies collected and placed inside the make-shift tent. By this time, their number had increased.

Another woman in wrapper and blouse with dark glasses covering her eyes, who sat beside this reporter at the ogogoro kiosk, rose from her seat, crossed to the other side of the road and also joined them. All the ladies, now over 20, pulled out the content of their 'walkie-talkie' polythene bags and began to undress. Like a relay race where the athletes wait for the referee to shout on-your-marks, they all pulled off the semi-decent clothes they wore and changed into something wacky, provocative and all-revealing. In just two minutes, the jeans trousers, skirts and tops suddenly disappeared and bikinis and petty coats took over.

By now, darkness had fully descended and illumination was only from the head lamps of passing vehicles and motorcycles. They lit candle sticks inside the tent while some among them also lit cigarette sticks and began to puff away. As if on cue, young men begin trickling into the arena and the 'business' then took off for real.

Welcome to Onitsha-Lagos park bypass, the unofficial headquarters of illicit sex in Onitsha. Prostitution, they say, is one of the oldest 'professions' in the world. It takes various forms and methods, depending on the peculiarities of the people and the area involved.

Sunday Sun investigation in Onitsha revealed that illicit sex trade thrives unabated despite the campaigns against the spread of Human Immuno-Deficiency Virus (HIV) and the Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) coupled with all the preaching against immorality in churches and mosques.

Investigation further revealed that some of the prostitutes engage in unprotected sex with clients provided the monetary exchange is right. This reporter spent several days combing different parts of the town between 6pm and midnight and the discoveries were incredible.

The Onitsha big sex market

Apart from trying to unearth how the prostitutes start their business every night, it was discovered that the prostitution business is a big network at the Upper Iweka-Lagos Park, comprising various actors with different roles. Located conspicuously behind the Upper Iweka flyover and sandwiched between Ekeson and Chisco parks is a thriving prostitution racket. Here a bottle of beer costs more

than a bout of illicit sex. It is an open market for barrow pushers and other classes of men, who desire to sleep with women for a price.

There is no night life in Onitsha owing to the security situation and peculiarity of the area. But another sort of night business thrives, unknown to a large number of the city dwellers.

The Onitsha-Lagos park wakes up early as the cock crows for those who want to take the first buses to their various destinations. Surprisingly, the area never goes to sleep. This is not because trading or business lasts that long but a different transaction, weird in nature, replaces the normal businesses of the day. Prostitution, debauchery and other crimes take over from 6:45pm to 10pm.

From the entrance of the bypass to the end connecting the flyover and Port Harcourt Road, commercial sex workers in different sizes, colours and shapes beckon to male passers-by, soliciting patronage. Dressed in the most provocative wears, they chorus: "Fine man, I will do you fine oh"; "Brother, you will like my service"; as well as other seductive and amorous clichés.

From the several nights spent in the area, it was discovered that most shops and kiosks in that axis were converted to emergency brothels when the rightful owners had closed for the day's business. Sex takes place on wooden benches arranged in double rows. Each tent contains a minimum of three wooden benches and the male clients have sex with the prostitutes in turns. Sometimes, the three benches can be occupied at the same time while everybody does his own thing not minding the other person's business.

The benches are owned by some men inside the park, who rent them to the prostitutes for a fee daily.

Further enquires revealed that the sex workers have an informal union as any intending member must first be inducted before she is allowed to ply her trade in the area.

Pretending to be a 'customer', the reporter gave one of them, who identified herself as Jane, a generous tip and she disclosed that the business was good and revealed further how they operate.

"We have our oga (boss) here, who supervises what we do. He is the one who supplies us condoms through one of his friends, who is a medicine dealer at the Onitsha Bridge Head Market. We also pay him a certain stipend at the end of the day. A round of sex here is N300 but sometimes we reduce the amount if the person is stingy."

Sunday Sun also learnt that the proprietor of the sex business has private rooms within the park that serve those who do not want to share the sex tent with others. A private room for 'short time' costs N700.

The scramble for leftovers

The activities of the sex workers assume a frenzied dimension from 10pm. During the peak period between 7pm and 8.30pm, it is not easy to get the ladies to follow a client home for all-night service. But it is a different ball game from 10pm as they become willing to follow a prospective customer home. This is when Okada riders and bus drivers, who sleep in the motor park for the next day's onward journey, come to make their pick for the night.

Onitsha is a transport hub for many mass transit companies. So, most of the drivers, who book turns for the following day's journey, sleep inside their vehicles in the parks. But some of them choose to sleep with female company.

A driver with one of the thriving transport companies in the South East, who craved anonymity, said: "I wish somebody could record scenes in most of these motor parks at night on video. The playback will shock people. Despite warnings by the management, most of our drivers bring in prostitutes late in the night and sleep with them inside their vehicles. Some of the vehicles people board in the day are moving brothels.

"What they do is that they have sex with these women inside the vehicle by adjusting the seats to look like beds. They clean up the seats and discharge the women by 5am and fix their vehicles for passengers to board from 6am. Some of the crashes you see on the road these days are as a result of the weakness of the driver from the hangover of illicit sex the previous night."

The army barracks sex market

Located inside the Onitsha army barracks is another sprawling sex market, popularly known as Sokoto Road. Although nobody could say how the name emerged, the area is very popular among residents of the cantonment and easily known by all Okada operators within the barracks.

This is another world of its own. Parading women of all categories, Sokoto line is an archetypal Sodom and Gomorrah. A visit to the area confirms the saying that some parents at the snap of their fingers can trace their family lineage to three generations, yet cannot trace where their daughter slept last night.

Sokoto Line is a place where mother and daughter hawk their bodies for money at the same time. Consisting of ramshackle structures built with wooden or zinc batchers, the inhabitants are resident prostitutes ready to offer lustful pleasures to willing customers without batting an eyelid that the doors are open.

In this place, it is a free world. Pornography and sale of alcoholic beverages and weeds are some of the accompanying features.

Sex has coded meanings here. One of the prostitutes, a big dark-skinned lady sitting in front of her room with an opening to advertise her well made bed, asked this reporter: “Brother, you wan toilet?” meaning, do you want to have sex?

Another said: “Come and shine your congo, Nwoke oma (fine man).” Another wanted to drag the reporter inside her room just as a young lady was shouting in Igbo language: “onye ga alam otua ego o nyem (who will have sex with me and offer me money?)

You see men streaming in and out of the rooms while this reporter settled down to a bottle of drink at one of the joints. Even pregnant mothers and young girls between 18 and 20 years are not left out. Some of the older ladies readily accept N100 for a round of sex. The ladies openly flaunt their assets and try to entice any man passing by.

There is no electricity in the area but the well-to-do among them use generators and decorated their rooms with flashy lights to attract clients while those who cannot afford the luxury rely on candles and lanterns.

A conversation with the proprietor of one of the restaurants known as “Bravo” revealed that it is a case of if-you-can’t-beat-them-join-them. Bravo said that he had lived in Sokoto Line for 16 years when he was ejected from his former residence inside the barracks because he couldn’t pay his rent.

“I came here and started this business and that was when I began to foot my bills.” Asked whether he was not worried that his children may be influenced by the negative lifestyle of the residents, he quickly retorted: “It is God that trains children. What of those who came from noble families but still join cult groups in school and end up being killed? My children are well trained, disciplined and focused. They cannot be influenced badly,” he said

On what might be responsible for the upsurge in prostitution in society today, a clinical psychologist, Dr. Kene Onyekwelu, attributed it to economic reasons, unemployment and the drive to belong by some women.

“Seventy per cent of women who engage in prostitution do it out of greed. Others enter as a result of lack of good family upbringing and inadequate parental monitoring while some others suffer from some kind of psychological disorder,” he said.

A public affairs analyst, Martins Onuegbu, blamed the high rate of prostitution in Onitsha on systemic failure just as he indicted the regulatory agencies, citizens and the government.

“Look at the society and you will see that we are actually the architects of our own problem. The police normally patrol the streets in the day and at night but instead of arresting those destroying the society, they look for their own pockets. Men are also to be blamed because the prostitutes would have closed shop a long time ago if men don’t patronize them. Most of us sleep with anything on skirt at the heat of passion without remembering the consequence.

“Also, most of the girls resort to selling their bodies because there are no jobs and the government is not even ready to employ in the nearest future. They will tell you that they cannot even pay minimum wage not to talk of employing more hands,” Onuegbu stated.

But the Anambra State Commissioner for Women Affairs and Social Development, Dr Cordelia Ego Uzoezie, countered those who blame the government for not doing enough in empowering women.

Speaking in a telephone interview, the commissioner admonished those involved in commercial sex business to re-examine their lifestyle and avail themselves the opportunity of various empowerment programmes provided by the government.

“Government has been doing a lot in Anambra State to rehabilitate and empower women. Those who castigate the government are either not serious or are being economical with the truth.

“Every local government council in the state today has a skill acquisition centre and it is open for groups and individuals. How can a healthy woman take to prostitution on the excuse that there is no job? Recently, a blind lady came to my office with several bags she produced using local beads. We encouraged her and even enlisted her to be part of our programmes in the future.

“For the past two years, we have been encouraging people to access our skills and rehabilitation centre at Nteje in Oyi local government but some will choose to live a loose, carefree lifestyle and turn around to blame it on government,” she said.