

1.1 Introduction

The question that needs to be addressed is: what is “social” about social problem? Why is it different from individual problems? In the 21st century Nigerian state, a list of current social problems in the country might include **poverty, prostitution, armed robbery, violence, terrorism, HIV-AIDs, unemployment, drug abuse, tribalism, teenage pregnancy, examination malpractices, corruption, divorce, single parenting and religious fundamentalism**. The reasons these problems have sneaked into the social realm and are considered as social problems is because they have captured public interest, anxiety or concern and have gained a hold on the attention of the Nigerian society at this point in time in our historical development. It is important to say that what is a social problem in one society may not necessarily be a social problem in another society. For instance, what commands public attention in Germany, the USA, UK or China is likely to be different in at least some respects to what is a current social problem in Nigeria. It is also true that if we look back at earlier historical periods in Nigeria, only some of the listed current social problems would be visible then. For example, HIV-AIDs, Terrorism, Cybercrime and Single Parenting, among others, are becoming social problems in Nigeria because they have captured social attention and concern.

1.2. What then is a social problem?

Social problem, like every social concept, has been defined in various ways and arising from different sociological perspectives. However, the following definitions will aid students’ understanding of what social problem is.

- Social problem simply is a problem that poses a threat to the well-being, survival, continuity, health and prosperity of a society.
- Social problems are widespread and intense worries that collectively demand leadership, social attention and intervention.
- A social problem is recognised as a condition that has been “incorporated into a community’s or organisation’s agenda for action.”
- A social problem is a phenomenon that disturbs society, prompts for social action and intervention and that requires government’s response.
- A social problem is a behavior or circumstance that is not regarded as desirable, acceptable and normal within a group or community. It is regarded as deviations from community or societal standards e.g. prostitution, corruption, terrorist acts, armed robbery activities, and others.
- Social problems are “social” because they have social causes and consequences and treating them requires changes in social behavior e.g. HIV-AIDs, prostitution, child abuse and trafficking, etc.
- A social problem is a social condition that a segment of society views as harmful to members of society and in need of remedy.

1.3. Sociological Perspectives on Social Problems

As we hinted earlier, there are sociological perspectives that try to explain what social problem is from their own particular viewpoint. Here we will treat the following:

- Functionalist Perspective
- Conflict Perspective
- Interactionist Perspective
- Feminist Perspective

The Functionalist Perspective

From the functionalist viewpoint, social problems are functional in the society. Simply put, functionalists see social problems as serving a function in society. For instance, crime, as a social problem, can engender solidarity in a group or society to fight it. Besides, crime is the reason we have the Police force, paramilitary and other security agencies who are employed to checkmate the threat crime poses in the society. Without crime and criminals, therefore, these people will lose their jobs.

Conflict Perspective

Conflict theorists view the problems in society as being the uneven outcome of competition among various interest groups for limited resources. This struggle takes many forms, often pitting more powerful groups, with little concern for general social interests, against less powerful, but directly affected groups. For instance, political violence is instigated by powerful forces in the society to enforce their selfish and “particularistic” desire on the general interest of members of society. Additionally, in Nigeria, tribalism has become a vehicle for the expression of ethnic dominance in particular areas in society. Many political leaders will seek to promote the welfare and interests of the ethnic group they represent as against the general well-being of the country.

Interactionist Perspective

Focusing on how people “subjectively” define reality, interactionists examine how values, shared expectations, and perceptions apply to social problems in a society. This means that social problems can be interpreted to be so based on the values of a people, their individual perceptions and expectations. For instance, another man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter or martyr. Another good example is that some people in Africa and in some parts of the world still believe that HIV-AIDs does not exist and that it is a mere ploy by the West to deny African people the pleasures they can derive from sexual activities.

Feminist Perspective

Feminists view society as being structured along gender lines. Thus, according to this theory, women and girls are victims of the different social problems that exist in society. For instance, feminists believe that war is caused by men but that women, girls and children bear the negative

consequences more than men. Furthermore, the feminist theory canvasses that even concerning the issue of poverty, the society is masculinised and gendered in such a way that women are the ones that suffer most, are jobless, lack education and training and suffer from family violence.