

# Workplace Hazards and Social Positioning Efforts of Male Adolescent Labourers in Suburb Sawmills, Lagos State Nigeria

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## Abstract

*Young people with low socioeconomic background require resilience to survive in a city with limited opportunities. Unintendedly such efforts sometimes affect their well-being. Such is the case of adolescent dwelling in some urban suburbs across cultures. Based on sixteen face-to-face interviews with adolescent boys working as labourers in suburb sawmills; this paper situates the notion of boyhood and survival into adulthood within a social space. The findings revealed conscious absorption with the notion of boyhood through certain rules of engagement and survival measures. These strategies include self-care practices geared towards achieving a healthy body for contextualised performance in the factory settings. However, this comes with series of consequences as boys lived out the social notions of boyhood and rules of engagement in activities for survival and social recognition. Hence, understanding and targeting the positive survival strategies of this social category of adolescents could be useful to empower and minimise the hazards of working and growing as adolescents in the physical and social spaces of sawmills.*

**Keywords:** *Sawmills, Hazards, urban slums, boyhood, masculinities*

## Resume

*Les jeunes à faible contexte socio-économique nécessitent résilience pour survivre dans une ville avec des possibilités limitées. Unintendedly ces efforts affectent parfois leur bien-être. Tel est le cas de l'adolescent demeure dans certaines banlieues urbaines à travers les cultures. Basé sur seize entretiens en face à face avec des adolescents travaillant comme ouvriers dans les scieries de la banlieue; Ce document situe la notion de jeunesse et de la survie à l'âge adulte dans un espace social. Les résultats ont révélé une absorption consciente avec la notion d'enfance grâce à certaines règles de mesures de l'engagement et de survie. Ces stratégies comprennent des pratiques d'auto-soins orientés vers la réalisation d'un corps sain pour la performance contextualisée dans les réglages d'usine. Toutefois, cela vient avec série de conséquences que les garçons vivaient les notions sociales de la jeunesse et des règles d'engagement dans des activités de survie et de reconnaissance sociale. Par conséquent, la compréhension et le ciblage des stratégies de survie positifs de cette catégorie sociale des adolescents pourrait être utile de responsabiliser et*

*de minimiser les risques liés au travail et de plus en plus comme des adolescents dans les espaces physiques et sociaux des scieries.*

**Mots-clés:** *scieries, les dangers, les bidonvilles, enfance, masculinités*

## Introduction

High cost of living, unemployment and poor housing conditions among other factors are common in the everyday challenges of young people especially those in urban suburbs (Kabiru et al., 2013a, Cubbin et al., 2000). Surviving the everyday challenges in urban suburbs requires the development of certain social relations, strategies and skills for social recognition. However, there are consequences (both intended and unintended) as boys are encouraged to live out the cultural notions of boyhood and appropriate rules of engagement for survival and social recognition purposes. Despite this, available evidence shows that a few studies have focused on survival and social positioning efforts of adolescents in vulnerable spaces (Cauce et al., 2011) in including sawmills in suburban areas.

Sawmills in Nigeria and some social settings in Africa are hazardous physical and social space to work as an adult and adolescent (Bello and Mijinyawa, 2010). The worse scenario in the Nigerian context comes from medium and small scale industries where workplace hazards and compensations often went unreported or handled in a paternalistic manner (Bello and Mijinyawa, 2010). With the peculiarities around residing and earning, a living in urban suburbs, there is a need to explore what it means to grow up and survive in sawmills as adolescents. The context, nature and physical space of sawmills create differential survival options for the boy and girl child even as they work and live within and around their immediate physical environment (Horn, 2000). However, among the various studies on the conditions of a sawmill in Nigeria, no study has focused on the situation of these adolescents and what it means to live, work and survive in urban sawmills in Nigeria.

Empirical evidence has shown a continuum of coexistence on the influence of social structural factors and how social actors employ their individual agency in negotiating life challenges and associated outcomes (Kohli and Meyer, 1986, Shanahan, 2000). Hence, this paper situates the notion of boyhood by interrogating the view of adolescent boys working as labourers in suburb sawmills. Particular focus is on their survival strategies including self-care practices aimed at productivity enhancement and the unintended consequences such actions could have on their survival into adulthood. The overall aim of this paper is to contextualise the variations that exist within a given context for the boy child and how such variations could shape decisions and survival into adulthood. From a relational approach to masculinity and well-being (Courtenay, 2000), the study situates the meanings and experiences of 16 adolescent labourers within the spaces of urbanism and slum sawmills, in Lagos State, Nigeria. The paper proceeds by focusing on

the urbanism and boyhood experiences. This was followed by a contextual overview of sawmills and work safety challenges in Nigeria. The methodology adopted in generating the empirical data came next and followed by a presentation of the findings. The paper ended with a discussion of the implications of these findings and a conclusion.

## **Masculinities and Boyhood in urban slums**

The question of who and what differentiate boys from girls are paramount to gender studies (Gardiner, 2013). Thus, as a social construct, gender provides a framework to understand boys and girls for whom they are by focusing on the roles of cultural beliefs, norms and values. Through this approach, rich body of theoretical and methodological approaches have emerged to account for the existence of multiple masculinities and femininities among boys and girls within similar and different cultural settings.

The existence of multiple masculinities and femininities is an indication of the heterogeneity that exists even within a given cultural context. Also, it indicates the active role of individual agencies in interrogating cultural prescriptions and expectations. Pleck et al. (1994) argue that boys and girls adopt the notions of masculinity and femininity from their cultures in a co-constructor manner that provides the opportunity for relative flexibility and diversity in orientations within and between genders. By utilising individual agencies, boys and girls can process and deploy attitudinal dispositions and context relevant orientations in relating to and resolving life events (Messerschmidt, 1993). Social actors require this form of active involvement in constructing and reconstructing their social realities for several purposes. However, this does not occur without some degree of variations. There are gender differences as boys become masculine in orientation they become more susceptible to practices including health-related ones that could undermine their well-being (Courtenay, 2000). Such orientations are perceived useful and needed partly for adaptation and surviving social and physical challenges including crime (Courtenay, 2000) and other forms of life challenges in the sub-burbs. As Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) pointed out, masculine roles and norms are contingent on varying socio-contextual factors and are fluid rather than static. Through this perspective, this study explores how adolescent employ their masculinities in responding to the survival challenges of working and living in sawmill community.

As a physical space, suburbs are characterised by poor physical environment and housing conditions that impact on well-being and network of social relations (Cubbin et al., 2000, Sawyer, 2014). Historically, small and medium sawmills in Nigeria are often located in sub-burbs with poor physical characteristics (Akachuku, 2000, Fatusi and Erhabor, 1996). Also, these sawmills double as factories and communities where people with similar socio-economic activities earn their living and reside. The typical sawmill in Lagos Nigeria is often located close to the ocean. The few habitable areas are sand filled

or filled by sawdust-by products of woods. Through this process, spaces are created for wood processing, temporal or makeshifts rooms for habitation as well as limited spaces for recreation. All these among other factors make the environment uniquely hazardous to healthy living. Over the years, sawmill communities in Lagos have a history of recurrent episodes of fire outbreaks. The recent of such occurred on April 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014 at Ebute Meta (Akinkuotu, 2014). From empirical studies on the influence of environment on behaviours (Leventhal and Brooks-Gunn, 2000, Bronfenbrenner, 1986), contexts and relationships shape the experiences and activities that make the boyhood phenomenon as a lived reality. Thus, the uniqueness of each environment has consequences for the inhabitants. As such, the experiences and activities that make the boyhood a phenomenon are better appreciated within contexts. Ironically, in Nigeria, no study has explored the experiences and uniqueness associated with earning a living and residing in sawmills communities.

Studies have shown how privileges and marginalisation within space and time influence the growing experiences and obtainable socio-economic activities, and health outcomes (Cubbin et al., 2000) among various social categories. Without relegating individual agency in the outcome of life events, Wolch and Dear (2014) argue that the geography of a social setting has telling effects on career choice, friendships, and obtainable economic and social activities within and amongst different social categories. From a relational constructionist position, growing up as a boy in sawmill communities would be very challenging as experiences and orientations of who and what a boy could do are shaped by structural and network of relations. The next section provides additional details on the nature and operation of sawmill factories in the Nigerian context.

## **Sawmills and Work Safety Challenges in the Nigerian Context**

Nigeria as a country has been afflicted with many preventable occupational hazards that serve as a reminder that occupational health and safety is undermined (Adeogun and Okafor, 2013, Ezenwa, 2001). Series of preventable hazards have occurred over the years. For instance, the leakage of domestic gas on the 14<sup>th</sup> of April 2008 at Kaduna Refinery that resulted in an explosion and intense tongue of fire killing five people and causing secondary accidents, as well. Series of repeated fire outbreaks have occurred in sawmills with devastating effects on workers and residents around these sawmills in Lagos State, Nigeria. Despite the colossal loss associated with these fire outbreaks, marginal efforts have been directed at ensuring the safety and health of those working and living around sawmills in Nigeria.

As a place to earn a daily living, employment consideration at sawmills is based on paternalism, and physical look is not minding the age of the job seeker. This does not imply that employers or owners of sawmills are unaware of the labour laws and factory

safety acts. Rather, it is the dominance of fragile monitoring framework and the desire to maximise profits. Similarly, attitudes also influence the implementation of compensation for labourers that suffer hazards in the course of their employment (Ahiazu, 1984, Bamidele et al., 2010). While the legal environment contributes in great dimension, such factory practices have concomitant effects on worker's expectations and dispositions towards hazards as well as the obtainable safety nets in the event of any hazards (Bode et al., 2000, Fatusi and Erhabor, 1996). With the fragile framework of action, working in sawmills may prove quite challenging for male adolescents. This may also be associated with the social preference for masculinity in deciding on the nature and quality of productivity that is expected from boys compare to girls working in sawmills.

The nature of work in sawmills creates high plausibility of workplace hazards especially in a social context where adherence to minimum safety measures is far from standard practice. Sawmill workers in Nigeria are exposed to work-related and environmental hazards and avoidable deaths in some cases (Osagbemi et al., 2010, Fatusi and Erhabor, 1996, Bode et al., 2000). The situation is complicated by the use of obsolete machines and equipment, poor working conditions, poor safety practices, inadequate monitoring, workers' negligence and poor work posture (Osagbemi et al., 2010, Bamidele et al., 2010). The growing industrial and technological activities with inadequate monitoring and flagrant disregard for the law have increased the vulnerability of the average factory, unemployed youths that are seeking a living by all means (Ezenwa, 2001).

Work practices and safety observation are crucial to ensuring safety and minimization of workplace hazards. Safety culture has different meanings across cultures and within work environments (Zhang et al., 2002). The literature is filled with different interpretations and meanings of safety culture. Two among these interpretations appeal more to this study: "The safety culture of an organization is the product of individual and group values, attitudes, competencies, and patterns of behaviour that determine the commitment to, and the style and proficiency of an organization's health and safety management" (Zhang et al., 2002). Safety culture as "shared values (what is important) and beliefs (how things work) that interact with an organization's structures and control systems to produce behavioural norms" (Zhang et al., 2002). In Nigeria, safety culture at the factory level in particular, especially among small and medium scale industry, seems elusive (Ezenwa, 2001). The international labour organization has suggested factory safety recommendations with details on what the safety standard should be. In reality, a deviation from these standards has been the case while the results are hazards with grave consequences.

Despite the availability of best practices and the promulgation of laws that will ensure their enforcement, often in practice, organizations and employees /workers deviation has been a regular pattern (Kouabenan, 2009). At the individual and organisational level, risks analysis and prevention is associated with some factors. Some of the factors include individual beliefs and prevailing cultural practices in the workplace (Kouabenan,

2009). Ironically, in the literature, there is a marginal focus on the essentiality of beliefs in understanding hazards occurrence and prevention (Kouabenan, 2009, Guldenmund, 2000). In the Nigerian context, where religious beliefs and practices are held in high esteem including workplaces (Ahiazu, 1984, Adogame, 2010), the tendency to construe the occurrence of work hazards as an ordinary occurrence remains high.

By the International Labour conventions, every employer of labour is required to make the workplace conducive to the employees and others having any business within an organization. The labour laws specify the rights and privileges of the employer and employees, including the need for the employer to present in clear terms, the possible occurrence of hazards or risks and ways or measures of avoiding them in the workplace (Baram, 2009). However, in practice, deviations from this expected norms and values are also a frequent occurrence in small-scale sawmills in Nigeria (Bello and Mijinyawa, 2010). Presently in Nigeria, the enforcement mechanism of the factory laws in the small-scale sawmills seems frail. Some of the pitfalls include employers' claim of ignorance on certain aspects of the provisions of the ordinance, laws, code or decree. Desperate job seekers are more interested in getting the job than worry about the effect on their health (Bello and Mijinyawa, 2010). The "man-must-die" syndrome is usually the posture. However, when the realities of the new situation begin to dawn on them, they refuse to discuss it with the employer for fear of losing the job (Bello and Mijinyawa, 2010). As argued by Kouabenan (2009), an explanation for these deviations may also not be far from cultural beliefs and safety practices that may also vary with time and space.

The provision and efficient utilization of factory tools or equipment may ensure safety but not the absolute removal of injury or hazards. The possibility has been accounted for in the factory act under which an employer may be exonerated if the case of professional negligence can be established in the event of mishaps or hazards in the course of employment. The same also applies to the employer when there is established evidence of negligence in providing minimum safety measures in the factory or workplace. Beyond the mere recognition of the fallibility of human and negligence either consciously or otherwise, there is a need to understand the underlying cultural assumptions beliefs or practices that may be influencing workers and employers disposition towards work safety measures. While there are benefits in toeing this direction, cultural understanding of safety practices and patterns does not possess all the needed information that may be relevant in achieving a holistic prevention of work hazards and work safety promotion. However, exploring the reactions and interpretations of work hazards and the plausible direction of seeking redress may be useful in averting the occurrence of work hazards within a factory setting that operates far from the minimum standards.

## Methodology

### Research design

Empirical data is derived from a qualitative exploratory stance in investigating the notions of boyhood and survival strategies of sixteen adolescent labourers in slum sawmills in Lagos state, Nigeria. The exploratory qualitative approach provides an opportunity to interrogate and understand social realities from the viewpoints and experiences of social actors. It also provides an avenue for understanding the context and rationale for the evidence provided without which would have been difficult (Charlton and Barrow, 2002).

### Study Setting

Ebute Metta, the study location, is one of the largest timber yards in West Africa and has a long history of fire outbreaks (Akinkuotu, 2014). Sawmills in Ebute Meta are largely small scale, a feature of sawmills in the West African region. In response to industrial developments and expanding demands for quality wood, a considerable number of sawmills have been established in Nigeria, and these provide employment for many people (Bello and Mijinyawa, 2010). Geographically, the rainforest areas in the South western part of Nigeria have a thick presence of quality wood making it sustainable for saw milling activities. The largest concentration of sawmills is in Lagos, Ekiti, Osun, the Cross River, Ondo, Oyo, Ibo, Edo, Delta, and Ogun states. Together, they account for over 90% of saw milling activities in the country (Bello and Mijinyawa, 2010, Bamidele et al., 2010).

Sawmills in Nigeria and some social settings in Africa are hazardous physical and social space to work as an adult and adolescent (Fatusi and Erhabor, 1996). The situation has grown worse with the instability in the political economy cum the absence of monitoring and implementation of factory safety practices and compensations in the advent of hazards. Structural, factory based (organisational) and employee's oriented factors contribute in diverse dimensions to the current state of the industry in Nigeria (Fatusi and Erhabor, 1996, Bello and Mijinyawa, 2010). Without a doubt, worse case scenarios exist in a number of African settings where neo-liberalism and crave for profiteering have contributed to the vulnerability of certain social class, gender and age as well the compromise of workers' safety and well-being. These scenarios are diverse based on contextual and historical factors. The diversities are also observable from the publicity attracted and the management of these crises over the years. Work hazards and compensation in the Nigerian sawmill industry often go unreported or handled

in a *paternalistic manner*(Abiauzu, 1984). This creates a sense that the provision of organization statements on safety practices does not translate to the existence of safety culture. However, the context, nature and physical space of sawmills create differential survival options for a boy and girl child even as they work and live within and around their immediate physical environment.

## **Recruitment Procedure Data Collection and Analysis**

Sixteen face-to-face interviews were done among adolescent labourers. The interviews were conducted with the help of two field assists. Both assistants are male postgraduate students in the department of sociology and anthropology with working experience in social research among adolescents. Before the data collection, the research assistant were trained with the interview guide and asked to role-play. Despite my familiarity with sawmills in the study location, to gain the rapport of potential participants, we spent four days interacting with three adolescents within the communities and shared the study objectives with them.

The interaction took place on an open football field in the evenings after they had close from the sawmills where they work. This provided the informants more time to ask questions about the study and relay the information to potential participants. Through this interaction, two additional participants were recruited for the study. Subsequently, the five participants referred us to other adolescents with similar characteristics. On the overall, sixteen interviews were held among adolescents working in the sawmills within the community. All the interviews took place in preferred locations and after working hours. Weekdays were busy, and Sunday was considered more appropriate by the interviewees. Thus, ten of the interviews occurred on Sunday, while the remaining six were held late evenings on Fridays and Saturdays. All the interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and translated from Yoruba to the English language.

The data analysis was done using a thematic approach. At first, all the transcribed and translated interviews were read several times to understand the data with a sense of depth. This helped in coding the data deductively based on a relational approach to masculinity and how the adolescent labourers adopt their masculinities in negotiating an identity, survival and meaning-makings within the spaces of urban slum sawmills. Through this process, similar patterns were identified and categorised into themes as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Without losing participants' voice, the thematic presentation of the findings was supported with extracts from the interviews and to provide a context for the participant's positions.



## Findings

Boyhood within the physical and social spaces of urban slum sawmills require conscious awareness and active engagement with the norms and strategies for survival. This is essential to cope with the challenges and depressing nature of sawmills as workplace and living areas. The emerged themes speak in a diverse but interrelated manner to the experiences of these adolescents within sawmills as a sub-burb community. From the analysis, the four themes of interest include the notion of boyhood, rules of engagement and survival measures; self-care practices geared towards a healthy body; performance enhancers and possible health consequences; and survival into adulthood, and the 'man must die syndrome.'

## Participants' Profiles

The socio-demographic characteristics of the 16 interviewees revealed similarities in parents' socio-economic status. The average age at which the participants started working in sawmills was 13.5 years. This low average age of the participants prompted further questions on their years of schooling and future aspirations. From the responses, poor academic performances and access to education was a problem prior to their search for employment at sawmills. Only three out of the interviewees disliked schooling due to physical punishments and the view that both educated and non-educated would end up working for money. As such, an early start will bring them the needed money. Ironically, the average labourer at sawmills works for 10 hours per day and earn a daily wage that is about 7 US Dollars. From the narratives and based on the erratic power supply, the average wage per day vary and could even amount to zero income on occasions when there is a total outage or load shedding of power supply. On such occasions, the interviewees will engage in footballing and table tennis with the hope of returning to work without further delay.

Due to poor wages and low socio-economic background, a higher proportion of their incomes is expended on feeding with little left for clothing or savings through daily contributions known as *Esusu*<sup>1</sup>. It is worthy to note that the poor income and survival challenges notwithstanding, three of the interviewees claimed to have girlfriends. Also, six among the remaining participants already had their first sexual experience. Smoking and drinking is also common among sawmill workers and a few of the participants. Two of the interviewees admitted to smoking but were reluctant to disclose whether they smoke marijuana, cigarette, or both. However, they argued that smoking help in reducing their worries and stimulate their spirits. On the average, each interviewee has worked or lived in sawmills for a minimum of two years. All the adolescents work

<sup>1</sup> *An informal system of savings common in many communities within south western Nigeria. See OSUNTOGUN, A., ADEYEMO, R. & OSUNTOGUN, A. 1981. Mobilization of Rural Savings and Credit Extension by Pre-Cooperative Organisations in South Western Nigeria /LA Mobilisation DE L'Epargne Rurale ET L'octroide DE Credit DE LA Part D'Organisations Pre-Cooperatives Dans LE Sud-Ouest DU Nigeria Savings and Development, 247-261. for more details.*

as auxiliaries to the machine operator and other older or senior workers in sawmills. On few occasions, four among the interviewees that were aged 18 years of age served as assistant machine operators. A predominant responsibility of the interviewees was loading and off-loading of timber and planks. Only one of them is involved in packing and dumping of sawdust. The hope of leaving the Sawmill was dim. However, almost all the participants pray against hazards and miraculous financial breakthrough to enable them settle for a brighter tomorrow.

## **Sawmills as factories and residential areas: entry and exit rationale**

Despite the existing variations in the participants' narratives, individual patterns and consistency emerged in the rationale provided for seeking a living in slum sawmills. Entrance and exit routes are diverse for current and potential inhabitants and labourers in the sawmills. Starting with the entrance, situational factors including the social inequalities and the perceptions of sawmill as a promising source of earning a living and relatively affordable space for living stimulated the move or relocation of some of the adolescents to sawmill communities and factories. For some of the interviewees, the survival challenges associated with high poverty level, the high cost of living and low socio-economic background are critical push factors to search for a living at the sawmills.

*Life is difficult, but as a boy, you just have to search for a way out so that you do not die of hunger.*

*My parents are indigent, and there is none around to assist, so I need to work since I do not want to steal*

Among the five participants who shared deprivation, experiences are those whose parents or relatives reside within the sawmill communities. The other group includes those whose means of livelihood and residence are within sawmills, but whose parents are living outside the sawmill. This latter category consists of adolescents that are school dropouts and lack meaningful supports from their significant others.

However, there are also those whose desire for early freedom and the need for financial independence from parents or relatives are critical determinants.

*At the initial stage, I thought it would be easy to make cool money once I start working here (sawmill).*

*Unfortunately, the money is not easy to come by, yet I do not want to return to my parents because I want my freedom (Adolescent aged 17)*

Interestingly, the narratives of some of the adolescents in this study pitched them within the category of young minds in search for a living and future due to socio-economic pressures. Interestingly, some of the participants also perceived their labouring efforts as part of their social obligations to their parents. To these interviewees, there is

an urgent need to support their poor parents and reduce the burden of living in urban areas. Hence, the motivation to work and live in the sawmill community. However, with time and mixed experiences, the factors that shape the move to work or live in sawmills expand as social life, and other contextual challenges emerge. This promotes individualism and personal determination to overcome the everyday challenges in sawmills settings. The daily routine includes early resumption at work, limited time for personal hygiene and craves to make more money. Paradoxically, the daily efforts of keeping soul and body together make them susceptible to work hazards that could cause partial, permanent disempowerment or death in some cases.

*While no one desires early death, a male child can only die once. Therefore, a boy must go out there and hustle*

### **Work hazards in Sawmill, Perceived Negligence and cultural beliefs**

Work hazards are routine occurrences at Sawmills. This includes minor, major and death in some occasions. With a minimum of two years working experiences, the interviewees described work hazards as a normal occurrence that has the influence of both physical and spiritual forces. Against this cultural perspective, the physical dimension to hazards occurrence lies in the nature of the hazards and their association with the use of obsolete equipment in the logging of timbers. Some the interviewees argue that some hazards be preventable events through the provision and right use of modern equipment. Unfortunately, such equipment is lacking despite that sawmill owner and labourers are aware of the hazards and the need to promote safety at these factories. While some of the interviewees also sympathise with some sawmill owners who have left the business due to the high cost of operation and poor returns on investments, provision of safety measures is inevitable and varies from one sawmill to another.

In contrast to the sympathetic disposition towards some sawmill owners; four among the participants argue that many owners be insensitive to the plight of their workers. Moreover, what is paramount to such employers is how to reduce and save costs at the expense of lives and safety of those working for them. With some years of working in sawmills, it could be possible for some of the participants to have observed the indifference in the disposition of some sawmill owners to safety practices. This may be having ripple effects on workers' disposal to safety measures in their daily tasks. From a binary position, it could stimulate fear and panic as workers may adhere to the safest form of practice to avoid any mishap. In contrast, it could also encourage Lukewarmness and vulnerability to hazards.

*I think they (sawmill owners) see you (labourers) as voiceless and vulnerable since many of us working here (sawmill) are from a low-socioeconomic background*

*Some ogas (sawmill owners) will curse and abuse you as nobody. No wahala (no problem) for omo boy (the boy child)*

Some of the interviewees belittled the passive attitudes of sawmill owners towards the provision and enforcement of adequate safety measures as well as discretionary implementation of compensation in the course of an accident. Only a few owners provide gloves, dust mask, goggles/face shield and fall protection equipment.

*It is true that some sawmill owners are reluctant in providing some needed safety measures like gloves, shield and others. However, they are not the only ones at fault. Some greedy employees have stolen such in the past and on some occasions and for some reasons; some employees hardly comply thereby complicating the situation.*

The possible frustrations that come along with the view that employees (sawmill workers) are from the low ebb of the society could promote low adherence and disloyalty among the labourers. Low adherence to safety practices promotes the vulnerability to different hazards that are capable of predisposing sawmill workers to various forms of health problems. The interviewee confirmed a frequent occurrence of conditions such as arm injuries, eye problems; cold, catarrh and electric shocks among sawmill workers. For some of the participants, these conditions occur partly due to negligence and inadequate safety measures.

In the same vein, one of the employees also expressed dismay in the negligence and passive dispositions of some machine operators towards complying with safety standards in the Sawmills. Thus, the effectiveness of safety measures and hazards prevention also depends on other factors like the quality of materials and perceived the usefulness of the available measures.

*Some operators are carefree and will not check for leakages or naked electric cables on the machine. Through such negligence, many inevitable deaths have occurred on many occasions.*

The perceived relevance of and adherence to safety standards in the workplace did not stop some of the interviewees to invoke a cultural belief that the emphasis on the inevitability of certain events in the life of any individual. This position could be described as a soft determinism towards hazards occurrence as some of them emphasised safety adherence as a useful practice. From this soft predetermined worldview, some of the interviewees expressed the view that work hazards are sometimes difficult to avoid except through prayers and adherence to safety standards. In support of pre-determinism, four among the interviewees described *ori* (inner head)<sup>2</sup> and evil machinations a critical determinant alongside with negligence of workers.

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2 *Ori inu is a Yoruba worldview that emphasis the place of predeterminism in the occurrence of events in the life of an individual. In the same vein, as a philosophical view, ori is critical to the occurrence of good and evil in the lifetime of an individual and it is one's ori that helps in creating a distinction in the patterns of occurrence from one individual to another.*

*Some hazards are questionable and beyond ordinary explanations. In this year alone, I have seen two cases of electrocution that are not just explainable.*

*As a boy, you just have to believe in prayers and spiritual matters to avoid some evils especially the evil machinations of those around you.*

Despite this latter emphasis on spiritual forces causing some hazards, a consensus among the participants was the need for urgent efforts at curbing the worrisome situation of hazards in sawmills.

## **Survival and the rules of engagement in the sawmill**

Surviving boyhood within sawmills consists of exposure to prevailing norms and values; the inculcation and normative demonstration of these values in everyday activities. Within time and space, boys are expected to adopt and utilise traits that will qualify them for higher responsibilities associated with being a man. To scale through the boyhood stage into adulthood, it requires conscious efforts, determination to adapt to certain norms and practices that characterise male adulthood. The narratives of the participants reveal how adolescents within sawmills struggle and compete to look like older males within the community. This involves emulating certain rules of engagement, which include frowning, developing thick and baritone voice, ruggedness and fearlessness.

*Behaving like a girl cannot fetch you anything in life. You have to be hard as a boy and face life challenges whether good or bad.*

In addition to the hardness of the mind is the need for a hard or bold look. Maintaining a bold face is essential and functional for many reasons. One of such reason is to show to others that you are someone that is serious. By this disposition, it will be frightening for exploiters and those around to cheat or look down on your physical strength. It also helps in confronting issues and people that ordinarily you keep mute when in their presence. Providing a further explanation of the need to maintain a bold face, a participant described how his smiling face in the past has been misconstrued as weakness.

*You have to talk in certain ways if not people will keep on treating you like a small boy*

These rules are aimed at modifying the physical look and the mind even though dissimilarities may exist between individual beliefs, feelings and prevailing rules of engagement. However, survival of the fittest is the rule of the game. From the narratives, physical strength is essential for performance and respect. For the adolescents, all efforts

are thus required to achieve a scaring physical fitness.

*You need much power (physical strength) to survive the challenges of working in sawmills. It is when you have enough strength that you can work.*

With the nature and quality of productivity that is expected from labourers within sawmills, physical strength as a rule of survival attracts a high premium. How then is this achieved? Enhancement of performance is normative and possible with substance use, quality feeding and building of the muscles. The poor wage that labourers in the sawmills earn might have influenced their definition of good food as eating heavy meals that take more time to digest. Ironically, substance abuse and building of muscles coexist in the everyday practices of male residents in the sawmills. Three among the interviewees gave a vivid description of the relative ease at which substance like marijuana is easier to afford than getting a balanced meal. In their opinion, many male adults in sawmills consume marijuana at different degrees to maintain a level of boldness and cope with the stress of their work and dating.

*People consume much fish (marijuana) in this place during break time and after work. I do not take it, but some of my age mates working in that sawmill over there does. I am afraid of its future consequences on my health.*

*Boys take some of those things so that they can talk to a girl or fight a boy to win over his girlfriend.*

Similar to marijuana use is the consumption of herbal mixtures of different types. These mixtures are perceived as beneficial in keeping the body in good shape. There are herbal mixtures with water, and there are those that are mixed with dry gins and other alcoholic drink. Interestingly, there is a preference for the herbal mixtures with alcohol. An explanation for this preference may be associated with the psychological effects of alcohol and the bitterness of some of these herbs. In the narratives of one of the interviewees:

*Herbal mixtures are very nice, and they work for different purposes. The very common ones are to enhance your performance (sexual) when you meet with a girl, and there are those to help your body and wade off infections.*

## **Self-care practices geared towards performance enhancement and healthy body**

Self-care practices and performance enhancement emerged dominant in the participants' narratives. Throughout the interviews, individual survival and success were hinged on resilience and cultural beliefs. The interviewees described the body as a given object that houses the spirit and the soul, which requires regular and adequate maintenance. Without proper care, living becomes threatened as the strength to support activities that will guarantee profitable returns reduce.

*Work, rest and give your body what it needs to keep your spirit and soul together*

As stated earlier, keeping a healthy body also includes consumption of traditional medicines like herbal mixtures. Participants also consume synthetic drugs through self-medication. The consumption of caffeinated drinks and drugs with caffeine was widely reported. Through experience, such drugs and drinks help in lifting the mind and quick relief from aches and stress. Some these drugs are sold by medicine vendors who hawk these drugs around sawmills and within the community as a whole.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper situates the notion of boyhood by exploring the view of adolescent boys working as labourers in suburb sawmills. Particular focus is on their survival strategies including self-care practices of enhancing productivity and the unintended consequences such actions could have on their health. The paper's overall aim is to contextualise the variations that exist within a given context for the boy child and how such shape the decisions and survival into adulthood. Empirical qualitative data is derived from face-to-face interviews with adolescent labourers in commercial sawmills in Lagos state, Nigeria. Sawmills covered in this study are factories and place of residence for a high proportion of the suburban population in Lagos State, Nigeria. A theoretical phenomenological stance guides the data generation as well as interpretations.

Empowering adolescents and youths in Nigerian suburban communities requires concrete and directed efforts. With the early entry into the labour and contextual rationalisation of such efforts among adolescents in this study, the findings support other studies. Child labour was widespread in different contexts and communities in Nigeria (Omokhodion et al., 2006, Fetuga et al., 2005). However, suburban communities are largely marginalised in diverse ways including inadequate social amenities and limited employment opportunities. Marginalisation of suburban communities has grave consequences on the larger society and not the communities alone. As an open and interactive sub-system, suburbs like sawmills provide essential services to the larger society. One of the functional roles is the provision of timbers for different purposes, sources of employment and income for diverse social categories and a relatively affordable place of residence for urban dwellers with low social, and economic status (Aiyeloja et al., 2013). The covert roles include pollution in various forms (Oguntoke et al., 2013, Oloruntade et al., 2013) and social space for learning and transmission of social vices.

Sawmills as factories and residential areas provided mixed expectations and outcomes for the limited number of adolescents that were interviewed in this study. The incongruence between life events, personal desires and expectations, emerged vividly in the results and experiences of the adolescent labourers. The adolescents adopted different but related strategies in adapting to the social expectations and norms that separate boyhood from girlhood. The appropriate response to challenges and opportunities

stimulate entrance into higher responsibilities and social acceptability. This also sustained the resilience to look forward to the future by working harder to keep body and soul together. As factories and residential physical and social space, prevailing careers within the immediate environment could alter the career aspirations of these adolescents and other youths in the communities. This possibility has been established in a Kenyan study on career aspirations of youths in suburban slums (Kabiru et al., 2013b).

Besides career aspirations, there are possibilities of developing values and practices that may be unhealthy to the adolescent or their peers and their communities (Kabiru et al., 2013b). In this study, the rationalisation of marijuana consumption by some of the adolescents despite the health implications is worrisome. This finding supports existing studies on the influence of environment and social behaviour including smoking and alcohol consumption among adolescents (Rowe et al., 2013, Sznitman et al., 2013, Acuda et al., 2011). Public production and consumption of marijuana in Nigeria is illegal. Studies have shown how different factors keep aiding the production and consumption of marijuana among youths in Nigeria (Acuda et al., 2011, Mamman et al., 2014). Unfortunately, the growing rate of substance abuse creates a dilemma for some of the participants in this study as they struggle between what is attractive and personally beneficial as a survival strategy. This also supports other findings on substance abuse among adolescents in Nigeria (Mamman et al., 2014).

The search for a living at sawmills also implies exposure to different work hazards. Some these hazards cause incapacity and sudden death in some cases (Osagbemi et al., 2010). Prevention of hazards is collective and requires timely and adequate provisions and adherence to safety measures. Ironically, there are deviations as employers fail to provide these safety measures while some employees are negligent in complying with expected safety practices. This supports other studies that safety in small and medium scale sawmills in Nigeria remains a challenge as many hazards have occurred over the years (Bamidele et al., 2010, Osagbemi et al., 2010).

However, the cultural beliefs that some work hazards are inevitable as expressed by some of the participants call for more sensitisation on workplace safety. This worldview is synonymous with the position that an adequate provision of safety measures and effective adherence does exclude absolute exclusion of hazards. While this may be true for certain natural events, hazards in sawmills as reported by several studies are preventable or predictable. Unfortunately, the unwillingness to accept compensation responsibilities among sawmill owners and the prevailing cultural beliefs about life events as expressed through other avenues will keep on propagating the view that caution and carefulness are insufficient measures of avoiding workplace hazards. In the literature, De Santis et al. (2007) argued that work 'safety culture can be evident through the actions and inactions of personnel at all levels of the organization no matter how robust the systems and the engineering are in that organization.' The absence of adequate safety measures or the indifference of sawmill owners towards 'healthy factory' may be synonymous with worker's indifference to their safety at



work. This may be an indication that such factory owners are not expecting any occurrence of work hazards or are optimistic that such occurrence may be minimal.

Ability to adapt is a requisite survival for any living organism. Sawmills as a sub-system have its norms and values similar to the larger social system but with possible particularities. The prevailing norms and values within sub-systems also change depending on developments within and around the larger system. Through this continuum, social actors adopt strategies that are useful in navigating through the opportunities and challenges within and around their various spaces. The adolescents in this study confirmed the existence and perceived relevance of norms and values that are required for daily survival and growth into adulthood. This requires understanding the common forms of survival and redefining these measures in interacting with others around and within sawmills. Through this process, language, appearances and attitude among other behavioural traits are modified. The rules of engagement are hazy, and changes as the adolescent spend more years in sawmills. Unfortunately, both useful and harmful practices transmitted through this process. However, whether an adolescent will acquire beneficial or harmful practices also depend on other factors such as career aspirations, religious beliefs and practices and a network of support including neighbourhood and housing types.

At the individual level, survival in sawmills requires determination and doggedness as there are moments of despair and lack of income. From the participants' narratives, there are many events and life outcomes that labourers face on a daily basis. Erratic power supply remains a major threat to regular income. The problem of power supply in Nigeria has lingered for many years with devastating effects on small and medium scale organisations and the economy at large. While there are ongoing efforts at improving power generation and distribution in Nigeria, the experiences and effects of power supply problem will differ for individuals with the same social setting. From the narratives of the adolescents in this study, interruption or power outage creates opportunities for leisure and starvation if the problem lingers for days. However, the resilience to face each day as it comes and move on with life helped in one way or the other. In this same direction and as stated earlier, substance abuse becomes rationalised as some adolescents take to marijuana consumption as a way of coping with daily challenges and performance enhancement. Ironically, substance abuse and alcoholic consumption in adolescence has proximate health effects in adulthood (Chassin et al., 2002, Bachman et al., 2013) and dating aggressions (McNaughton Reyes et al., 2014).

Among the participants, reliance on self-care including a medication is expected due to inadequate income, poor or absence of social amenities in suburban communities. Self-care practices are rationalised initiatives taken by social actors in resolving or adapting to the needs around them (Denyes et al., 2001). Self-medication is common among adolescents and other social categories in Nigeria. Structural, community and individual factors account for the widespread of this practice (Omolase et al., 2007, Sapkota et al., 2010).

To some of the participants, self-care practices such as medication and consumption

of substances qualify as proactive steps in sustaining productivity and healthy body. Self-medication encourages drug abuse and with possible negative implications for health. However, with inadequate income and absence of medical aid or free health services, it is predictable that individuals would engage in self-care practices including medication and consumption of herbal mixtures as espoused by the participants.

The findings from this study are limited based on the research approach and focus on the experiences and survival strategies of adolescent labourers in suburb sawmills. With an emphasis on workplace hazards and survival in sawmills, other issues such as their sexual and reproductive health are not covered. A mixed method approach could have provided additional insights and generalizable findings with the study context. Despite the limitations, this study is first amongst others that will focus on adolescent labourers as a social category and their boyhood experiences as workers and residents in sawmill factories and communities.

In conclusion, this paper presents the notion of boyhood among adolescent labourers in suburb sawmills, Nigeria. Sawmills as factories and place of residence for adolescents provide opportunities, and that warrants the appropriation of individual resilience for survival and social positioning. Through this process, male adolescent labourers are socialised into norms and practices that promote self-care practices aimed at improving performance and maintaining healthy bodies. Unfortunately, prevailing work hazards and inadequate compensations within the sawmill industry in Nigeria are disastrous to the aspirations and quality of labour force within the industry. Resilience at the individual level is critical to positioning and survival in slums and hazardous workplaces. Nevertheless, unending struggle to earn a living could stimulate substance abuse, alcohol intake (Mugisha et al., 2003), and the use of marijuana and herbal concoctions to enhance performance. These have implications on the well-being and survival of young people into adulthood (Kabiru et al., 2013a, Sommers, 2010). With the absence of effective monitoring framework, the vulnerability of sawmill employees to preventable hazards may continue alongside with poor pay package. Sustainable measures that are commensurate with the increasing workplace safety challenges are required (Tucker and Turner, 2013). The urgency of protecting vulnerable young people seeking a living in urban slums is much required (Sommers, 2010).

## Competing interest

**The author declares to have no competing interests.**

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