

# CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT: THE IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GIRL-CHILD EDUCATION IN CROSS RIVER STATE

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## ABSTRACT

Child abuse and neglect is a phenomenon which has received attention world wide. The first African Continental Workshop was held in Enugu, Nigeria in 1986 with the Federal Government and Anambra State lending full support. The workshop resulted in the formation of the African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN).

Women are generally deprived by dictates of culture and society in Nigeria and other parts of the world. In Cross River State nay in Nigeria, it is typical. in the family setting, that if choices are to be made for the children's development, such choices are usually made in favour of the boys. The girls belong elsewhere. They will marry and bare other names so why worry about them, it is generally felt.

With the successes recorded by women in politics, science and other areas of human endeavour both in Nigeria and elsewhere, it would be beneficial to society to allow growth to full potential of the girl-child by not abusing and neglecting her. Government should take definite measures through legislation to ensure that educational opportunities are not denied the girl-child for reason of her sex.

**Key words:** Child, Abuse, girls, women, government

## INTRODUCTION

Attention become drawn world wide to the vexed issue of child abuse and neglect when in 1962 a famous Paediatrician and founder of the National Centre for the Prevention of Abuse and Neglect in the United States of America, Dr. Henry Kempe, published his well known paper titled "The Battered Child Syndrome". According to Kempe, a child who suffers any severe physical injury inflicted on him deliberately by another person, often much older, can be said to be a victim of child abuse and neglect. Kempe's efforts yielded fast results culminating in the birth of an International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN), with International Congresses holding in Geneva 1976, in London the following year while further Congresses of ISPCAN held in Amsterdam, Paris, Montreal and Australia in 1981, 1982, 1984 and 1986 respectively.

The efforts and advocacy at international

level by Kempe and his colleagues were not lost to scholars in Africa. The African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and

Neglect (ANPPCAN) was born out of a gathering of scholars from various parts of Africa in Enugu, Nigeria, in May 1986. Since 1986, there has been a growing awareness in this area, thanks to the work of ANPPCAN, under the leadership of Peter Ebigbo, a Professor of Paediatrics in the University of Nigeria Teaching Hospital, Enugu. Not much has been written on Child Abuse and Neglect in Nigeria. One does not however, need to go far to seek evidence of Child Abuse and Neglect in this country and indeed in all of Africa. There is a UNICEF (1986) definition of Child Abuse and Neglect which sees it as the apportion of harm to children that results from human action that is proscribed, proximate and preventable. This definition agrees well with that of Kempe quoted earlier as both draw attention to the deliberate nature of the act of inflicting the pain or causing

deprivation to the child.

In the course of this discuss, various forms of abuse and neglect suffered by children with emphasis on the girl-child will be examined. What remains to be said in this introductory part of the work is that in a country like Nigeria of which Cross River State is a part where there seem to have been such strong compelling factors as to result in the Nigerian initiative for the formation of Africa Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect - witness the inaugural meeting in Enugu in 1986, it seems evident that the prevalence of abuse and neglect of children has become worrisome and requiring attention.

Judging from the element of deprivation present in the definition of the term under review, the problem of abuse and neglect is bound to affect the development of the abused and neglected child in more ways than one. This paper will examine some forms of abuse and neglect prevalent in the Nigerian society and the effect suffered by children as a result. Subsequently it will be necessary to look at Education in Nigeria and Cross River State in particular the aims, and the extent to which these aims are achieved or not achieved in the face of abuse and neglect of the girl-child in Cross River State.

## CROSS RIVER STATE

The basically agrarian people of Cross River State came into contact with western civilization early enough to have made giant strides in education. Lamentably, it remains one of the educationally disadvantaged states in Nigeria. With early arrival of the Catholic Priests and Presbyterian Missionaries who established schools like St. Patrick's College Calabar and Mary Knoll College Okuku, Ogoja by the former and Hope Waddel Institute Calabar by the later in the very part of the 20th Century, Cross River State ought to have done better educationally. The abuse and neglect of the girl-child could well be one reason for this sad situation.

## WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

Peter Ebigbo (1988) has a definition of the term with a wider scope which has more relevance

to the topic of this paper, i.e.

*'Any deliberate act by a person, group, or society designed to inflict harm on a child or prevent it from normal, mental physical, emotional and moral development...'*

Ebigbo stresses the point that any human person, children inclusive, have a basic right to a name, nationality, shelter, food, medical care, and education. If by an act of commission or omission these heights are made unattainable, such a child is being made to suffer abuse and neglect. Conditions should be made conducive for the attainments of these basic rights. It is the failure to make such provision that constitutes abuse and neglect.

In his conception, Yakubu, (1990) sees Child Abuse and Neglect as referring to acts, intentional or unintentional, that endanger the physical health, emotional, moral and educational welfare of the child.

Child abuse and neglect can be summed up, as a deliberate act by a person or group of persons, to deny a defenseless child, the inalienable rights of a normal life and normal development of the human person. When the necessary conditions for a child's normal development are deliberately not sought after and provided for by parent(s) or society for the child, such a child suffers neglect and abuse.

## FORMS OF ABUSE AND NEGLECT

### (a) Child Dumping

A visit to a motherless babies' home in any of our Nigerian cities reveal bizarre situations under which the beautiful but motherless babies arrive at such centres. Babies found in dust bins, at doctors' consulting rooms, door steps, in pit lavatories along bush paths, in motor packs, in flower gardens, are brought to the centres by some concerned citizens whose hearts bleed to find babies abandoned in conditions intended to eliminate such babies. There are those who actually die before they are found. Those, who are brought to motherless babies' homes are deprived of the love a mother should show her child. The assurance of love and security which in the unutterable conversation that goes on

between mother and child as both look into each others eyes during breast feeding is explicable but certainly has a great influence on the child's developmental process. This is what an abandoned child is deprived of by his own mother, one who perhaps has been forced by circumstances of Abuse and neglect to become a mother prematurely - an abused girl-child finds herself-a mother, unprepared. Much as the welfare officers may do their best, their best cannot replace or satisfy the value of a mother's own love and care.

A mother's love is not replaceable. There is what is described by psychologists as repetitive compulsion. Children who grow up knowing little or no love are affected by this hardness and consequently develop attitudes that are influenced by this situation. Their loveless and un-friendly attitude towards other people and their social interactions in later life as adults are a manifestation of this condition. If they become teachers in later life this repetitive compulsion manifests itself in their abuse of the children entrusted to their care. Some girls may abandon school as a result. It is observed that the girl-child is almost always the abandoned baby. The chances of the girl-child are abused even at baby stage.

### **Sexual Abuse**

Girls are most vulnerable. Children who serve as househelps have been found to have suffered sexual abuse by the master of the house who takes advantage of the working housewife to return to the house in her absence. There are also very frequent incidents of sexual abuse of girl hawkers by prospective buyers. The value of the activity being engaged in is in this way lost to the child. Whether it is in the mastery of baby minding for the girl abused by the master, or the art of trading by the abused hawker girl, or in the inculcation of some useful educational skills by the abused school girl, - the development of the abused child is badly hindered by the effect of the abuse which she suffers. If pregnancy results, goodbye to school, goodbye to even a future decent married life. The girl-child who becomes sexually abused suffer a dramatic jeopardy in life achievements especially education.

### **Child Labour**

This paper considers that a child is any human person under the age of sixteen. There are certain levels of physical exertion which are beyond the ability of anyone in this age bracket. When a child is knowingly compelled to undertake responsibilities, mainly those involving physical exertion, even more for a girl, beyond her normal capabilities, such a child suffers abuse. This is a common phenomenon in Nigeria with her house girl syndrome where the day of such a househelp generally starts as early as five O'clock in the morning, carrying out duties, generally undefined, which could range from cooking, cleaning the house, washing and ironing clothes, preparing children for and taking them to school, and minding a four month old baby when father and mother have all gone to work. An average house girl in the circumstance could put in an average of some 13 to 15 hours of hard work in a given day. A child who grows up in this situation cannot be said to have had any childhood. This denial of childhood, like in the case of child dumping, does also stimulate in the child's later life, the attitude or repetitive compulsion. It stands to reason that one who has not enjoyed any childhood is not likely to be able to allow even his own children have a childhood. This situation does not foster good education. Because it is the girl who makes a better 'baby nurse', cook, laundry girl, their chances of education are reduced to a very thin line.

Writing in the Friday 24<sup>th</sup> August, 2001 edition of the Punch, a well known Nigerian daily, Tomori Abiola laments,

*"Children that are involved in child labour are usually exposed to dangerous people like kidnapers, who either transport them to other countries for child labour or use them for ritual purposes... children who hawk on the streets are likely to become street-wise early in life and may take up bad habits like stealing, pick-pocketing, and prostitution, while the girls may fall victim to rape..."*

Abiola states that child labour causes distraction in

the social development of the child leaving him little opportunity to participate in activities that children are usually interested in like sports, cultural, cultural education, and leisure. Girls are most vulnerable as in the child labour they do get abused sexually and a resultant pregnancy puts a premature end to any form of formal education which such a girl could ever hope for.

The physical and emotional maladjustment suffered by abused and neglected children impacts a great deal on the girl-child who may not develop properly henceforth without some definite rehabilitation measures. Such maladjustment leaves little room for the education of the affected girl-child.

### Hawking

Of all the forms of child abuse prevailing in Cross River State as in the rest of Nigeria, none exposes children as badly as street hawking.

A hawking child learns to cheat at an early age by fixing prices different from those fixed from home to enable her make a few extra kobo for her own use since, abused as she is, she may leave home without food. Hawkers fight with each other as they compete for customers. Sometimes hawkers even have to contend with cheating adult customers who may take advantage of the hawkers weak position due to age. The hawker child needs to fight back to save herself from unimaginable consequences at home in the event of any losses. There is also the danger of sexual abuse. The little salesmen and woman would go anywhere to sell. Some have to do that as a matter of life and death if they are to ensure that they get a meal at home on return. Girls are very vulnerable, yet even the mother prefers her daughter to hawk. Sexual abuse which comes with hawking has already been discussed in an earlier part of this paper. Kempe (1978) describes the situation very succinctly when he refers to the involvement of developmentally immature children and adolescents in sexual activities that they do not fully comprehend to which they are unable to give informed consent, or that violate the social taboos of family roles. Hawking is an abuse which exposes the child to several other abuses. Because of the level of poverty in the state, parents live just above poverty line only if their children hawk, they believe, to improve the

family income. Girls are denied schools for this reason, in many cases.

### Other Forms of Child Abuse and Neglect

In Nigeria and in particular, Cross River State, there abound many other forms by which children suffer abuse and neglect. The cases of inter communal conflict in various parts of the country are not far to seek. Every new farming season is heralded by such conflicts as communities struggle for arable farmland which is becoming scarce in some parts of the country due to desertification process, both natural and manmade. When communities clash, the children suffer. It is not always recalled in such warring situations that children are a zone of peace and that conflict should cease in the presence of children. Children's rights are badly abused in the face of the destabilizing effect of communal clashes which abound in Nigeria. In trouble times the girls suffer most. Rape is imminent, and mothers keep their girls at home when they feel unsafe.

When children are exposed drug addicted parents their reasoning as to the desirability of drugs is negatively affected. Children expect adults to chose rightly. The choice of drugs in the presence of children could and does lead children to take to drugs in later life. In some communities, especially among Muslims, street begging is an acceptable norm. The Mallam who is in charge of a number of children registered in his Madrasa (Koranic School) sends the children out to beg and the proceeds returned to him at the end of the day. This form of abuse of children exposes them to bad habits such as stealing, pocket picking, as well as sexual abuse in the case of girls. Even here in Cross River State, girls are similarly exposed. Although street begging is alien to the natives of Cross River State, parents are known to subject their children to prostitution, send their children to school without adequate provisions, or be so apathetic to the needs of the girl-child/that such young girls stand along the streets at night to sell their bodies for provision of school fees and other necessities of life. They get pregnant, get HIV aids and, there go their schooling.

Again in Muslim circles child marriage is an acceptable practice. Be this as it may, to marry out a ten year old child amounts to an abuse. Although the young wife may not have any sexual contact with the husband until she attains a certain level of physical maturity, other aspects of this union are harmful to the child's development, an important one being education which would thus be interrupted.

The pathetic situation of abuse and neglect of handicapped children in Nigeria is a serious case in point. It is generally felt that children born with certain infirmities or deformities are demonic and a curse or punishment on parents for some sin. This notion dates back to biblical times when the Pharisees referring to a man born blind asked Jesus whose sins so affected the man, his or those of his parents. Handicapped children, girls inclusive, should be given a chance to get an education and live a normal life. In some communities in Cross River State, to this day, children born with physical disabilities are 'destroyed' especially when such babies are girls.

Consequent upon the aspect of abuse earlier described i.e. - child abandonment, motherless babies homes are sometimes over crowded and Nigerians wishing to do so are allowed to adopt children. Although the laws relating to adoption insist on proper treatment of an adopted child, ensuring that the child is allowed all the rights and privileges of the children of the home into which the adopted child is 'born', the real situation may not always be the case. Such children especially girl-children so adopted sometimes end up as housegirls, hawkers, prostitutes etc., thus 'endangering', in the words of Prof. Yakubu (1990) 'the physical health, emotional, moral and educational welfare of the adopted child'.

Deviant parental care leads to grave deprivation for the children of such families. Parental deviation could lead to separation leading to serious problems of development of the child which come from multiple mothering and a complete distortion in the relationship that should exist between mother and child, for such functions as the ego to develop properly the child needs a sense of security which would be clearly absent in a child whose mother is forced to separate from a drunkard husband. Such

a child personality would be shaky having lacked a firm foundation of love and parental care.

Imposition from parents does constitute a developmental problem for children that amounts to an abuse. Some parents insist on lines of development of their children which are projections of themselves than a consideration of the children's own aptitude and ambitions. This has serious implications for Children's healthy development as will be presently postulated, especially in the area of education. This point should not be confused with the need for guidance and counselling of children by their parents. The point refers to a situation where it is not just a case of parents notion that children's interests may not always be in their own best interest as Peter (1974) would put it, but a situation where the interests of the child is not being taken into consideration, at all. Parents want to boost their own ego through their children's attainments by such imposition. Such impositions amounts to abuse. In the case of the girl-child there is always the notion that only 'lowly' disciplines like nursing, sewing and cookery are appropriate. The girl is denied the opportunity to develop her full potentials which might have been in the area of medicine or law.

### **Implications For Education of the girl child**

The forms of child abuse and neglect discussed in this paper are common to many countries of the world, especially countries of the developing world. In particular are they relevant to the Nigerian situation. All the forms recorded have negative influences on the general development of the child as seen earlier in Ebigbo's (1988) definition of child abuse and neglect as an act '...designed to inflict harm on a child or prevent it from normal, mental, physical, emotional and moral development...' It is the case therefore that in all cases of child abuse and neglect, normal development is hindered, and opportunities are denied. The abused and neglected Cross River State girl-child invariably suffers this deprivation and her educational opportunities this deprivation and her educational opportunities are drastically reduced, it stands to reason.

## Aims of Education

A number of values have been identified as underlying the quality of instructions in Nigerian schools as stipulated in the New National Policy on Education by which in 1981 the 6-3-3-4 system of education was introduced. These include respect for the worth and the dignity of the individual, the moral and spiritual values in inter-personal and human relations. Other include responsibility for common good of all, respect for the dignity of labour, and their promotion of the emotional, physical, and psychological health of all children. Linked to this philosophy of education are aims which include:-

- (a) Inculcation of national consciousness and national unity;
- (b) The inculcation of the right type of values and the Nigerian society;
- (c) The training of the mind in the understanding of the world around;
- (d) The acquisition of appropriate skills, abilities and competence, both mental and physical as equipment of the individual to live and contribute to the development of society.

In a word, education of the Nigerian child aims at development that is at once moral, economic social and political.

Against this background, the question arises as to how a Nigerian child that suffers abuse and neglect can ever hope to have these aims and objectives finding fulfilment in him. Child abuse and neglect has implications that are negative to education of the child.

## Education and the Abandoned girl-child

Abandoned children generally die. A few are saved and carried to motherless babies' homes with the attendant short supply of facilities and provisions. In Nigeria, social welfare services are very poorly funded. The home generally depend on the good will of social organisations who are more often than not seeking advertisement for their programmes. The home in Uwanse, Calabar, that constitutes the main one in Cross River State, would do with a little more care and funds. There are more abandoned

girls than boys, a situation helped by societal preference for male children. A nutritionally deprived child has impaired mental function shown by decreased ability to focus, orient or sustain interest in learning tasks. Such a child if she ever even gets to school has an in-built psychological handicap. Had she not been abused by the mother's abandonment, she might have a home where she is loved and might have gone to a school under conditions conducive for the attainment of set school objectives in Nigeria.

## Sexual Abuse And Education

The implications for education here are manifold. The possible resultant pregnancy will interrupt or terminate the girl child's schooling altogether, thereby limiting her chances. The Child's right to education is thus denied.

A sexually abused child loses confidence in herself, shies away from people, and when such an abuse is made public, becomes stigmatised. Performance in school is affected especially when the abuse is school related. Cases of teachers fathering children of their own pupils abound both in primary and secondary schools in Cross River State.

## Child Labour and Education

When children are introduced prematurely to information or operations far beyond their level of perception and cognition, damage is done to the normal trend of their development. It stands to reason that such prematurely introduced information, or operations, do become intellectually internalised but is equivalent to learning by rote which is improper. When the girl-child who should be in school is turned into a baby sitter, a house cleaner, a farm attendant, all of these common in Cross River state, education has no place in her life. The illiterate girl-child becomes an illiterate mother who begets another uneducated girl-child causing Cross River State to remain the educationally disadvantaged state that she is listed to be.

## CONCLUSION

In a state where child labour is seen as a means of having children make contribution to the

near poverty based family income, in a community where, like in other parts of Nigeria, Cross River State, women form 49% of the population (1991 Census), in a situation where the majority of female sector workers are in lower cadre occupations, what chance does the girl-child have to improve her lot by taking advantage of the most effective agent of change, education? Because women are neglected and abused, they remain basically poor and deprived. Because women folk in our community are not economically independent, they are incapable of funding their own girl-child education. The later grows up poor and deprived and reproduces her kind who would in turn continue this unending cycle of the abused and neglected girl-child in Cross River State, in Nigeria.

In a UNICEF 1994 publication, *The Progress of the Nations* the view is expressed that there is a widespread agreement that the education of girls is one of the most important investments that any developing country can make in its own future. In the long term, almost every other aspect of progress, from nutrition to family planning, from child health to women's rights, is profoundly affected by whether or not a nation educates its girls. This view, if appreciated would create a more positive reaction to the need for girl-child education.

The 1994 publication, looking at the educational progress of nations as judged by the percentage of girl children who reach at least grade 5 of primary school reports Nigeria's position to be only 51% as against other Sub-Saharan African Nations like Zimbabwe's 93%, Mauritius' 91% and Botswana's and Kenya's 86% and 71% respectively.

Child Abuse and neglect cannot fail to be largely responsible for the high school dropout rate in Nigeria, with pregnancy, child labour, child prostitution, ill-health, poor nutrition, being major forms of abuse and neglect of the girl-child.

In Cross River State where more than 50% of the people are farmers, the girl-child, who is deprived from utilizing limited opportunities for education, is more readily deployed to the farm with her father's four to five wives whose need for farm hands is a major reason for marrying that many of them in the first place.

The farmer girl-child sent to the farm to undertake child labour, an abuse for that age, ends

up staying out of school and becoming another illiterate mother to continue the vicious cycle.

Child abuse and neglect has very serious implications for girl child education anywhere as is very much the case for the girl-child in Cross River State of Nigeria.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Ministry of Education, Federal and State, should set up Guidance and Counselling units at primary and even at tertiary institutions level. Moral education would guide young girls against pre-marital sex to avoid unwanted pregnancies and the consequent child-dumping, and the premature stoppage of the girl-child's educational career.

2. Iffih, 1988 states that, *'No amount of description is ever sufficient or good enough to portray to a non-African, the full import of the positive significance of children in traditional Nigerian Society.'*

Iffih referred to children without distinction. The joy that attends the birth of a child, even a girl-child, should be sustained by families. Opportunities should be provided for both boys and girls, equally, to attain their full educational potential. Girls should not be sent out to hawk to improve family finances for the education of the boys. Government should legislate against hawking especially of the girl-child. Compulsory primary education which the Universal Basic Education (UBE) scheme insists on is seriously jeopardised by the practice of hawking especially where little girls of school age are the most highly vulnerable lot.

3. Co-educational institutions at primary and secondary school levels should be discouraged. At this level, the immature girls are easily distracted, deceived and lured by their teachers, often much older. Hear 15 year old Oyewo Sakeen of Okesura High School in this years program of the International Children's Day of Broadcasting.

*'Ignorance is another factor*

*that causes sexual exploitation in children. When a child is ignorant of his or her acts, she may fall easy prey to sexual exploiters without proper understanding of what life is all about.'*

Girls are sexually abused and their educational career disrupted or even brought to an abrupt end. The government should set up separate primary and secondary schools for boys and girls. This was obtainable in the days of mission schools and can still be reverted to, to protect and facilitate girl-child education.

4. Government should set an age limit below which girls should not be given out in marriage.

5. The Universal Basic Education law should be enforced across the nation's non-complying communities, parents, families, all should be prosecuted for deliberate retrogressive acts against the country.

6. Africa Network for the Protection and Prevention Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) is a non-governmental organisation which is doing superb work for the Nigerian child and many State Government especially where monitoring centers have been set up, have given them support. ANPPCAN should be encouraged to set up monitoring centers in every state of the Federation, and in Cross River State as a matter of urgency, to check the excesses of the abuse and neglect of the girl-child and indeed the child.

7. The State government should expand existing ones and establish new vocational education centres where the so-called abused house girls can be sent to learn a skill like hair-dressing, dress making, soap making, etc., to afford them a means of livelihood when their services as housegirls are no longer required. This would be in agreement with one of the goals of the Universal Basic Education (UBE) Scheme which stresses *'catering for the learning needs of young persons who, for one reason or another, have had to interrupt their school, through appropriate levels of literacy, numerical manipulative, communicative*

*and life skills, as well as the ethical moral and civic values needed for laying a solid foundation for life-long learning.'*

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