

CHILD ABUSE IN NIGERIA: DIMENSIONS, CAUSES, CONSEQUENCES AND CONTROL MEASURES

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ABSTRACT

Child abuse is the presence of inadequate child care. It results from abnormal interactions between the child, parent/guardians, childminders and the society at large. The thrust of this paper is to explore the various forms of child abuse in Nigeria, identify their causes, examine their effects on the child and the society and proffer control measures. Nutritional abuse, parental neglect, taunting, battering, sexual abuse, manual labour, child marriage and child trafficking are forms of child abuse. Poverty and the craziness for wealth are identified as the principal causes of human trafficking. The paper points out that child abuse smears Nigeria's image, leaves Nigerian girls stranded abroad, destroys family reputation, exposes girls to health hazards and destroys a child's future. It therefore recommends, among other things, that Nigerians should develop the culture of assisting the police in crime detection and prevention.

KEYWORDS: Child abuse, child trafficking, child labour, poverty, health hazard.

INTRODUCTION

According to both the United Nations Convention on the Rights and Responsibilities of the African Child, a person below the age of 18 years is considered a child. These documents to which Nigeria is a signatory set out various declarations which every nation-state must adhere to for the protection and welfare of children. These rights include: The right to education, health care, love and care, adequate food and shelter, clean environment as well as relaxation and recreation. The United Nations General Assembly (1989:1) thus declared that:

Respect for human rights begins with the way society treats its children. A caring society will give freedom and dignity to young people creating the conditions in which they can develop their full potential and so look forward to a full and satisfying adult life.

Two concepts are paramount in this discourse: "child" and "abuse." Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines the former as "a young person from the time they are born until they are aged 14 or 15" and the latter as "cruel or violent treatment of someone that you are responsible for or should look after."

Child abuse is the physical or psychological maltreatment of a child by an adult or adults. It might be perpetrated by a caregiver, who can be any of the following: biological, foster, or adoptive parents, guardians, kin, or other adults within family or outside it, in public or in private. Child abuse is often synonymous with the term child maltreatment and neglect. Negligence is the lack of an action or actions by a caregiver that result in harming a child.

To Chase (1976) child abuse is the deliberate and wilful injury of a child by a guardian either by hitting, beating with belt, cord or other implement, slamming against a wall, burning with cigarettes, scalding with hot water, locking in a dungeon, torturing, sexually abusing and even killing.

Child abuse therefore tries to describe instances where the adult society deliberately subjects a young person to a cruel and violent treatment. Child abuse is a thriving social malaise.

It is a social problem: a phenomenon that adversely affects the social life of majority of the people, who having realized this, make a conscious effort to combat it.

Dimensions of Child Abuse In Nigeria

There is no doubt that the rights and responsibilities of the Nigerian child are grossly abused and violated by Nigerian citizens through acts of commission and omission. Babarinsa (2004:5) avers that:

The tragedy of the Sodipo-Akindekos indicates how steeply our society has fallen. Even in times of war, children are regarded as sacrosanct; to be protected by decent soldiers. But in Nigeria today, many children are victims of ghoulish violence. They, in hundreds, are killed for rituals and for "spare parts." Perhaps thousands more are sold yearly to slavery. Despite the campaigns of many highly placed Nigerians, the violence continues and the trade in children flourishes. Every child in the street - from hawkers, to errand bearers, and pupils - is under the constant shadow of a killer, a robber, a slave raider or a mad driver.

Child abuse manifests itself in Nigerian polity in the following ways:

(i) Nutritional abuse. Nutrition is a process whereby living organisms utilize food energy and nutrients for maintenance of life, growth and normal functioning of organs and tissues and the production of energy.

Nutritional abuse could start at pregnancy when a woman does not have enough nourishment or the right food to foster proper development of the foetus, and neglects breast-feeding after birth. In some women, poor nutrition or lack of iodine may lower the chances of becoming pregnant or may destroy the embryo in the early stage of pregnancy, perhaps before the mother even realizes that she is pregnant. Also, a pregnant mother who smokes or takes narcotic drugs has already done an incalculable damage to the foetus. Sule (1994:31) submits that:

Overindulgence in any particular food for the child is also nutritional abuse, while under-feeding resulting in loss of weight is another form of nutritional abuse. Too cold or too hot food, infected food, left-over food or not properly cooked food are other instances.

Nigeria is riddled with such taboos which can deprive pregnant women, babies and small children of a variety of essential and nutritious foods such as eggs, meat, fish and vegetable. Alabi (1984) notes that if the food intake is dangerously restricted, the health of both mother and child is in jeopardy, the chances of having a low birth weight baby is increased, and the quantities of breast milk produced may not be adequate for the baby. Indeed, foetal abuse leads to mental retardation, deformation or abortion.

ii. Parental neglect. Children can be subjected to general dirtiness and unhealthiness or broken promises by care givers without valid reasons. Parents can therefore abuse and neglect their children physically, emotionally, morally and educationally. Some parents fail to provide academic materials (fees, textbooks and uniform) to their children until such children are driven home. This leads to stunted mental and emotional growth. Other parents neither enquire about their children's school work nor ensure that their children are properly clothed. Some engage their wards in so much domestic chores that they have no time for study. Alcohol and drug abuse by parents or caregivers also falls into this category.

iii. Taunting. Harsh treatment and insults from teachers to pupils and other innocent students affect such students and pupils psychologically.

iv. Physical abuse. This comprises spanking, bullying, violence or any second-degree burn associated with stoves, fire or boiling water, over aggressive behaviour like beating with belt buckles, or cigarette burns as well as genital modification and mutilation. By beating a child, a permanent physical injury could be inflicted. If a teacher slaps a student on the eye, the student could go blind.

v. Sexual abuse. Child prostitution, sexual harassment and rape (forced genital contact with or without penetration) incest (sexual abuse with close relatives), child marriage, female circumcision, parental refusal of needed medical care, unusually early preoccupation with sex, injured vagina or anus constitute sexual abuses. Sexual abuse of children by teachers, parents, siblings, househelps, neighbours are common in Nigerian society. Girls are forced into lesbianism and boys into sodomy by adults. Jaja (1994:12) asserts that:

A few mature men who offered information on known cases of homosexuality among rich men and school children agreed that in most cases, initially hard drugs and alcohol are administered to victims or they are showered with gifts to attract them. They usually give in to such practices as a way of getting money to spend freely.

vi. Non-conducive school climate. Lack of proper attention and teaching by teachers, lack of conducive school facilities like desk, chairs and other learning materials and equipment are forms of child abuse.

vii. Child marriage. Some communities marry out girls at a time when they are unaware of the sexual expectations of their husbands. The majority of such girls experience menarche (first menstrual period) in their marital homes and may have to ask their co-wives or mothers-in-law what to do. Commenting on the Hausa society in Nigeria, Altimuaza (1994:18) asserts that:

Child marriage is practised with the belief that it reduces promiscuity among wives and young girls, and because of the importance attached to virginity. Husbands want their wives to be virgins and for parents, it is a great honour for their daughters to be found to be virgins by their husbands so girls are married off long before they attain maturity.

viii. Child trafficking. Child trafficking is aimed at using the child

(i) for ritual
(ii) in a drug trade. The child could be used as a narcotic courier.

(iii) in a crime syndicate. The child could be used as a spy or an assassin.

(iv) in a sex trade. A girl-child could be used by sex merchants and patrons in pornography by being subjected to a sexual ordeal with such erotic animals like alsatian and apes. A boy could be sentenced to bestiality (sexual intercourse between a human being and an animal). Besides, a girl-child could be gang-raped.

(v) Smuggling
(vi) Slave labour. A child could be used for begging and harvesting more acreage of land than should be done at that age. The boys are made to work in places where they can hardly bargain for their pay. They just have to take whatever is given them.

ix. Child labour. In Nigeria, some children get involved in hawking. Others are engaged in manual labour in motor parks, collecting plastics at dangerous places, selling wares and doing one menial activity or another to earn some money. Even in schools, children are engaged in manual labour on farms and in teachers' homes instead of being taught.

Causes of Child Abuse

There are several causes of child abuse in Nigeria. They include

1. Poverty. Poverty is a situation whereby the basic needs (food, clothing and shelter) are not met. Kolawole (2004:17) admits this, saying:

I think the root cause of the manace of human trafficking is poverty. When people feel they are highly in need of things which they cannot get otherwise, then they feel that the best thing is to maybe send a child out to go and work somewhere for pay. Or in some cases, girls are sent out for prostitution and so on. Therefore, by and large, people think they can use what they have to get what they want. And what they have are their children, their daughters and relatives ... Some parents even think they are helping their children.

Indeed, many Nigerians are today living below poverty line. Similarly, in Nigeria the unemployment rate is high. Many families are falling apart because many people are out of job.

The divorce rate is high. Being out of job has certain emotional consequences. It affects the mood of the entire household. It leads to anger and despair which could be displayed in forms of aggression to the children.

2. **Institutional decay.** Many of the institutions that once provided stability for families are crumbling. The bond of the extended families which used to give the young the advantage of primary socialization has almost disappeared.

3. **Shallow commitment to ethical imperatives of an orderly society by Nigerian parents.** Lack of deep-rooted religious beliefs and shallow moral commitment to the ethical imperatives of an orderly, law-abiding society among many Nigerians largely account for disorderliness, indiscipline and crime. Sex abusers do so out of adventurism and take advantage of children because of their vulnerability.

4. **The devaluation of naira.** What people think of is that if they earn foreign currencies and remit same back home, by the time the money is changed into naira, they are going to get a lot of money

5. **The primacy of wealth in Nigerian societies.** In Nigeria wealth, irrespective of source is welcome. It serves as a status symbol and a yardstick for status comparison among individuals. This generates a craziness among miscreants to get the needed wealth by all means, fair or foul.

6. **The diabolical mindset of some Nigerians.** Godless education and outright wickedness have a guilty hand in this terrifying new development. Many Nigerians are indeed still playing the role of the biblical Barabas who was infamous for sedition and murder (Luke 23 verse 19). In this connection, Babarinsa (2004:9) laments that:

In Mushin, Lagos, three weeks ago a gang ... stormed a house in the densely populated area. They wanted to arrest someone who had offended one of their members. However, the quarry had gotten wind of their fiendish visit and fled. The invaders, however, met his wife and son at home. They quickly seized the son and threw him down from the four-storey building. The two-year old son died immediately. What kind of human beings would treat a child, any child, that way?

The Negative Consequences of Child Abuse

Child abuse has several negative consequences on the nation, the child and the parents. They include

i. **Smearing the image of the nation abroad.** Thomas (2004:14) tersely puts it that:

It is alleged that the government of Ukraine officially wrote her Nigerian counterpart during the recently concluded Commonwealth Heads of State and Government Meetings, which held in Abuja complaining about his (Abass) illicit activities - women trafficking and asking for the permission to prosecute the "most wanted" man.

ii. **Nigerian girls are stranded abroad.** Kolawole (2004:17) asserts that:

In fact, there are many Nigerian girls now in Senegal who are stranded because they had been made to believe that when they get to Senegal, they would get passports and visas that will take them to Europe and America easily ... Even if you go to Abidjan in Cote D'Ivoire, it is the same sad story. So you have girls who are stranded and can't even mix freely with the people since they can't speak their language.

Some are also harassed by the police since they have no resident or working permit.

iii. **Damage to family name.** For a parent to trade off her child is an evil act. Sooner or later such a parent would be ridiculed by the wider society for having done so.

iv. **Children are exposed to thuggery, smoking and other deviant acts too early in life as a result of hawking.**

v. **Destruction of the child's future.** A child who is the victim of human trafficking has lost the chances of gaining a formal education and therefore of self actualization.

vi. **Health hazard.** Child abuse comes in its wake with monumental but hidden paediatric problems. A girl-child who is abused sexually runs the risk of contracting venereal diseases such as herpes, syphilis and the dreaded Acquired Immuno Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS). AIDS has no cure; it kills. She also suffers from guilt, depression, anxiety, anger and hopelessness. It can lead to suicide or homicide.

Child marriages constitute a danger. Such marriages cause post partum haemorrhage, ante partum haemorrhage, anaemia, craniotomy, Caesarian sections, eclampsia, obstructed labour, retained placenta, macerated baby recto, vaginal fistula and vesico vaginal fistula. Adebajo (1992:9) tersely describes this unwholesome situation by asserting that:

It cannot be overemphasized that child marriages have negative effects on the psychological, physical and social well-being of the young girl. Where pregnancies occur, the entire make up of the girl is not yet developed for such functions as nurturing a developing foetus in her body and producing a baby without damaging the soft tissues of the pelvic area. Other complications which may arise from teenage pregnancies include: exacerbated pregnancy symptoms; chronic anaemia; obstructed labour; pre-eclampsia; vesico and recto vaginal fistuli causing leakage of urine and faeces; higher risk of maternal and child morbidity and mortality; prolonged reproductive period with repeated pregnancies leading to childbirth complications; broken homes and prostitution.

Indeed, several Nigerian girls take to prostitution as a result of forced child marriages that do not work.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Children are a treasure.** Parents should raise them in a Godly way.

2. Parents should not allow poverty to make them push their young innocent daughters into prostitution. They should plan for their children's education and useful ventures after schooling.

3. Parents are hereby reminded that children are gifts from God; they are not for sale.

4. Children should be educated on the need to report to an elder any attempt to lure them into the unknown. Ihejiofor (2004:15) reporting how Temple Eyo was kidnapped says:

Temple Eyo was barely 8 years old on the day he would have been sold ... To lure Eyo towards their criminal motive the duo were said to have told him that they had been watching his performance on the field of play and had discovered that he had a sparkling talent which if nurtured, would make him a great footballer for the country in the future. And to support him, they had made budgetary provisions to buy him a leather football, a pair of boots and a brand new jersey ... Being naive or so, it seemed, Eyo jumped into the car and followed them. Unknown to him, arrangement had been concluded to trade him off. ... But then fate jumped in to save the boy. The purported buyer was an officer of the Nigeria Police, Rivers State Command who serves at the River State Crime Investigation Division.

5. Nigerians should develop the culture of assisting the police. Crime detection and prevention is the responsibility of everybody. Community policing is essential. This they can do by reporting to the police promptly any person with a child not his or hers. Similarly, a woman with a large number of children not hers should be reported to the police.

6. The police, on their own, should mount an aggressive anti-crime patrol. They should be adequately equipped for this task.

7. There should be a massive presence of policemen on our streets particularly at night. This serves a major social stability function.

8. Stop-and-search should be reinstated at various spots on our highways.

9. Our borders should be properly manned by tested immigration officers. Creeks in riverine areas should be invaded frequently because they serve as hide-outs for human traffickers.

10. Society must also provide for the present adult group so that they (the adults) can provide for their children. Angry, dissatisfied parents produce, jarred and restless children. Our adult generation must be comfortable in order to give and teach comfort to the children.

11. Government should provide recreational facilities for her teeming youth.

12. The Federal Government of Nigeria should negotiate with foreign governments whose nationals are associated with child trafficking in Nigeria on how to combat this crime. For there to be any measure of sustainable development in the

African continent member nations must cooperate, exchange ideas, expertise and resources.

13. Sex abusers should be helped medically because they have sexual behavioural problems. They need to be reminded however that section 218 of the Criminal Code CAP77, laws of the Federation of Nigeria states that:

Any person who has unlawful knowledge of a girl under the age of thirteen years is guilty of a felony and is liable to imprisonment for life, with or without caning.

14. The National Assembly should enact appropriate laws to protect children from their callous adults be they parents or guardians.

15. Parents should insist on knowing the friends whom their children keep so as to give them Godly pieces of advice.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the various ways that child abuse can be noticed in the Nigerian polity. It has highlighted the destructive effects they exert on the individual, society and the nation and therefore calls for a check in the light of the belief that evil unchecked spreads; the evil condoned spoils the entire system. Moreover, child abuse is an affront to our sensibilities.

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