The Trajectory of Conflict and Child Abuse in Contemporary Nigeria

Friday Ifeanyichukwu Ogbuehi
Trinity Theological College, Umuahia, Nigeria
Email: ogbuehitheologian@gmail.com

Abstract

This article explores the interplay between conflict and child abuse; the various ways an armed conflict can be responsible for child abuse, particularly in a conflict torn area. It was conducted by using primary and secondary sources; historical and phenomenological approaches were used. The data were described and analyzed for easy clarification. It was discovered that child abuse was prevalent in Nigeria. There were other factors that were responsible for child abuse as highlighted in the paper, but it found conflict as uppermost. This is particularly so because when one considers the rampant conflicts that had made Nigeria restive and insecure. The neglect of the negative impact of conflict in fostering child abuse has led to an unbearable increase in the rate of child abuse in the country. As well, it was discovered that children were raped, killed, maimed, used for rituals, starved and rendered homeless during conflicts. The conclusion reached is that concerned authorities should make sure that conflict is not allowed to escalate to full blown war before it could be resolved. Security agencies deployed to arrest the situation should protect children from child abuse and make sure the perpetrators of child abuse are arrested and prosecuted accordingly.

Keywords: Conflict, Child abuse, Nigeria, Security agencies, Peace, Security.

Introduction

Conflict is as old as humanity. It is a universal phenomenon that threatens peace and security. There have been efforts made by various people in different times and places to curb this social

menace but it has remained intractable. Conflict affects everybody but more attention was given to adults by previous studies at the expense of children that are more vulnerable in conflict-ridden environments. However, researchers have dwelt on conflict from their perspectives while little or no attention was given to conflict as a precursor to child abuse (Chidi and Formella, p. 43; Olusegun and Idowu par. 3). Perhaps, it was caused by modern socio-cultural attitude that reduces children to mere objects of neglect and abuse. The high rate of insecurity in Nigeria is alarming and has attracted national and international concern (Omede and Omede, p. 121). Previous studies dwelt more on sexual, physical, emotional, social, psychological and social abuse of children (Omoera and Awosola "Child Abuse and Media: An Assessment", p. 128; Olusegun and Idowu par. 7; Awosola and Omoera "Child Rights and the Media", p. 125). However, the conflict related causes of child abuse has not been given adequate attention they deserve. Children have been suffering all sorts of abuse since the inter-ethnic wars, World Wars 1 and 11. It was due to huge violation of child's rights and reckless abuse of children during the World War 11 that informed the formation of the United Nations Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) in 1946 by the United Nations (Mingst par. 3). The high rate of child abuse across the globe is a clear indication that the performance of UNICEF to arrest this global challenge is abysmally low. However, children are still victims of conflicts and wars that ravage the world.

The Nigeria situation is not an exception. Child abuse in Nigeria particularly in Igboland where all the children suffered abuse during the Biafra/Nigeria Civil War from 1967-1970 has remained indelible in the minds of the people. Many children have been abused owing to ethno-religious conflicts, insurgencies, banditry, Fulani-herdsmen/farmers clashes, communal disputes, inter-states boundary disputes, kidnapping and human trafficking. It has been discovered that in conflict, wars, communal clashes and disputes children are the most vulnerable. Perhaps, their vulnerability stems from the cultural lenses through which children are viewed in adult dominated society. In *adultcentric* society like ours, children are neither regarded nor counted in the scheme of things. Rather, respect, adoration, reverence, preferential treatment and value are accorded to the adults by children that receive none. The UNICEF has revealed that child

abuse is promoted by African social norms, which encourage violence against children in form of discipline. This has rendered children the objects of violence (1). Children are the most defenseless creatures that cannot defend themselves in the midst of violence and conflict. They are not allowed to handle arms which deprives them the opportunity of self-defense.

Conceptual Clarifications

Child Abuse: Olusegun and Idowu claim that "a child is a person who has not attained the age of eighteen years"[n.pag]. The implication of this definition is that children are those whose ages fall between 0-18 years. No matter the height and weight of a person, as far as the person has not reached the age of maturity – eighteen years and above, the person is still a child. By the virtue of age, it is believed that a child has not reached the age of decision-making. So, are children dependent on their elders/parents/guardians for their social, political, educational and financial needs. Child abuse is an act or failure to act by a parent or a caretaker, which leads to the death, infliction of serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse and exploitation on the child (Olusegun and Idowu n.pag). Child abuse is not only caused by parents and caretakers. Experience has shown that child abusers cut across all strata of society, the same way victims of child abuse transcend class, religion, ethnic and racial backgrounds. In fact, every child is a potential victim of abuse. Child abuse is all kinds of injustice, abnormality and inhuman treatment meted out on a child by an adult (Ede and Kalu, p. 46).

Conflict: The term conflict etymologically originated from the Latin verb *confligere*, which means 'to strike'; and the Latin noun, *conflictus*, which means 'a contest' (Lexico.com n.pag). The term conflict is defined as a situation in which two parties struggle over scarce resources at a time while *violent conflict* means the utilization of lethal violence by the parties in conflict to gain control over disputed resources like a piece of land or local political power (Brosché and Elfversson n.pag). Conflict is dysfunctional when it negatively affects social order and stability, which are the basic foundation of every society (Okafor n.pag). In a conflict zone, children become more vulnerable to abuse. It creates a situation where children are not safe due to instability that predisposes depraved people to abuse them. Ethnic conflict means a situation in which

ethnic groups bring their differences to bear in pursuit of competing interests. It occurs when a minority group employs it to ensure fair and equitable treatment in the distribution and allocation of resources and power respectively (Anugwom, p. 69).

Child in Social, Cultural and Religious Perspectives

The Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria believe that children are created by God; hence, they belong to God. There are Igbo names that showcase that children belong to God and are children of God. Some of these names are *Nkechukwu, Chinwe* (God owns), *Nkechi* (Oha, Kumar, Anyanwu and Omoera, pp. 269-273). The Nuer of Ghana refers to children as *Gaa kwoth,* which means that they are children of God (Ifesieh, p. 211). In Igboland, children are seen as invaluable assets. They are regarded as wealth while some tribes like Igbo say that children are more precious than wealth. This informs the names they give to their children such as *Nwakaego-* child is greater than wealth, *Nwadiuto* – child is sweet, *Nwamaka* - child is good (Eze, p. 74). Children are priceless possessions that give honour and dignity to the father or mother. They are the consummation of marriage. In traditional African society, the number of children a man/woman has determines his/her wealth which is conveyed by names such as *Nwadinkpa* (child is very important), *Nwadiuko* (child is scarce), *Nwabugwu* (child is the pride of his father) and *Nwamaka* (child is valuable) (Obioma and Hyginus, p. 113).

Children are accorded honour and dignity given the African belief that children are reincarnated grandparents. They participate in rituals by singing and taking part in ritual processions (Kayode, p. 6). Children are not left out in important festivals; some children participate in Ogun festivals in Ondo by blowing local trumpets. Similarly, boys and girls flog themselves to mark new yam festival (Iwaji) in Ika, Delta State. Again, children parade the streets of Ibadan in Oyo State, in celebration of the Egungun festival. Beating of drums is done by children during the celebration of Oro (bull roarer) festival in Egba, Ogun State (Adewale, p. 105). In fact, children are seen as the heritage from the God almighty. Children are reward from the God and evidence of His blessing upon humankind. They remove shame and are a source of pride for their parents (Psalm 127:3-5). Unlike the New Testament discrimination against children, Paul's theology is child friendly. He recognized and counted children as

members of one's household and baptized them with the adults (Acts 16:31).

Conflict in Nigeria

The capital of Plateau State, Jos witnessed incessant communal conflicts that took place in 2001, 2002 and 2010 between Hausa and Fulani in one group and Anagutas, Afisare and Birom in another group. It is believed that Anagutas, Afisare and Birom are the aborigines while Hausa and Fulani are recent settlers. The bone of contention was dominance over political power, land and access to public goods (Brosché and Elfversson n.pag). There was communal conflict that broke out between Aguleri and Umuleri over boundary dispute which led to the death of more than 300 people, houses burnt and thousands of people displaced. After a month another clash erupted in Kafanchan in northern Nigeria that was caused by the installation of a new traditional ruler. The indigenes fought the Hausa-Fulani who they accused of dominating the traditional political space or institution. The Ijaws and Urhobos fought their Itsekiri neighbours in the town of Warri. Again, there were communal conflicts between Ife and Modakeke communities in southwest, the Jukun and the Kutebs in the northeast, and the Kataf and the Hausa-Fulani in the north (Ali-Dinar n.pag).

Furthermore, the Ezillo invited Ezza-Ezillo that migrated from Ezza South and Ezza North Local Government Areas of Ebonyi State to settle land dispute between them and Ngbo at Egu-Echara in the early 1930s. Ezza-Ezillo have lived with the Ezillo since the settlement of the dispute. However, there has been an issue between the two communities which has degenerated to indigene-settler clashes. But, the conflict that resulted in a full-blown war was when a boy from Ezillo had a disagreement with a man from Ezza concerning the erection of telephone booth at Isinkpuma motor park in Ebonyi State which later led to a blood bath (Oji and Eme, p. 515). The conflict between Ezza-Ezillo lasted between 2008 and 2011 and over 150 lives mostly women and children were lost, property worth millions of naira was destroyed. In Akwa Ibom State, Eyo Abasi, Isua and others had communal wars in 2018 which was caused by claims and counter-claims to the ownership of disputed oil rich area by the parties (Alozie, p. 44). The Fulani-herdsmen and farmers conflict in Benue State has claimed the lives of eighteen people

among them were two priests that were killed in an attack carried out by suspected herdsmen on a church in Makurdi, the capital of Benue State. In retaliation, 11 Hausa people were killed and two mosques attacked. It is estimated that since the conflict broke out in different parts of the country, about 2,500 people have lost their lives and about 175,000 including children have been displaced across the country (Kriesch *et al*, p. 44).

Effects of Conflict on Child Abuse

The London-based International Charity, 'Save the Children', revealed that about 420 million children live in conflict situations. This is worst in Africa that has 170 million children that live in war zones. The countries that are mostly affected are Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mali, Somalia, South Sudan and Nigeria is top in the list (*ThisDay* n.pag). Northern coup that seemed to be a revenge by northerners against the southerners given the coup organized by military aids of Igbo military officer, Chukwuma Kaduna Nzeogwu which resulted to the death of Abubakar Tafawa Balewa, Prime Minister of Nigeria and the Premier of Northern Region, Ahmadu Bello led to the massacre of the military and civilians that were mostly southerners. The Igbo resorted to declaring the "Republic of Biafra" which started in 1967 and lasted till 1970 which saw Chukwuemeka Odumekwu Ojukwu, the leader of the new republic. It is estimated that the 30 month civil war ushered in hostilities, disease and starvation that claimed about 3 million lives of Igbo people (Jacob, pp. 15-16).

There is no doubt that this country has been bedeviled by armed conflict since 2009. The Northeastern people of the Northern Nigeria have been dealt with by protracted Boko Haram insurgency (Omoera and Ogah); the Northwest is tormented by banditry while the North central is suffering from farmer-herder crises. In all these conflicts and insurgencies, children are the most vulnerable. As stated earlier, killings, maiming, burning down of houses and destruction of property worth billions of naira have become the order of the day in Nigeria. The ISWAP which broke away from Boko Haram, sometime ago attacked Monguno in Borno State, Nigeria, where many civilians, an innocent four-year-old girl were killed. This is a clear demonstration that not only that children are abused they are also not safe in war torn zones in some parts of this country (*ThisDay*

n.pag). It is has been discovered that conflict has severed family relationships by causing separation between children and their parents where the former are exposed to insecurity, violence, starvation, dropping out of school, conscription into the army and abuse. Many children are dying of malnutrition, disease, lack of health and poor sanitation. Apart from abduction of children and girls of which the adoption of Chibok schoolgirls is one of the examples, exposure of children to armed conflict is a source of children's morbidity and mortality. Amnesty International disclosed that children have been unlawfully detained and tortured by Nigerian security forces in north-east, Nigeria and about 10,000 victims mainly children have lost their lives in military detention (*ThisDay* n.pag). The World Food Programme (WFP) decried the high level of food shortage among hundreds of thousands of malnourished people that fled to neighbouring countries like Chad, Niger and Cameroon for safety from Boko Haram attacks. It is estimated that about three quarters of a million people in countries bordering Nigeria face acute food scarcity since the inception of the insurgency in the northeast (Stein n.pag).

Child abuse denies a child the parental love and care he needs to grow and become a responsible citizen. There is no doubt that long-term child abuse can cause psychological effects on the child to imbibe the erroneous impression that the world is hostile and may likely develop anti-social behaviour in life (Obikeze, p. 28). Physical abuse inflicts injury on the children like burns on the children's palms, soles or feet , abdomen and other sensitive parts of the body. They sustain injuries and bruises on their faces, upper arms, buttocks, thighs, lower back, marks on their bodies, broken bones, and black eyes. In extreme cases, the victims may be deformed for life. The acts that are associated with child abuse such as punching, beating, kicking, biting, shaking, throwing, choking, hitting, and burning or by any other means used by a parent, caregiver, foster parent, guardian, teachers and elder brothers and sisters can result in the death of the child. Child sexual abuse may lead to unwanted pregnancy and contracting of sexually transmitted infections (STIs). The sexually abused child may be identified by stains of blood on her legs and underwear. Sometimes, the child experiences difficulty in walking and sitting down due to the severe wound she sustains at her genital (Chidi and Formella, pp. 43-44).

Child abuse can cause problems such as inferiority complex, severe stress, psychological trauma, mental ill health, fear, sense of insecurity, fleeing from home, poor performance in school, misery, wretchedness, disability, depression, heart attack, increased blood pressure, insomnia and absent mindedness.

Recommendations

It is expected that the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) should put more effort in fighting child abuse by making sure that security of children is guaranteed, especially in conflict prone areas in Nigeria. There is no way UNICEF can succeed without the assistance of the federal government in checkmating the high rate of child abuse in the north and other areas in the country where conflicts have degenerated to ethno-religious conflicts, communal clashes and inter-state boundary disputes. It is the responsibility of the federal and state governments to protect lives and properties of the citizens. It is unfair for the government to remain 'quiet' and watch its citizens destroyed, especially children population. It is pathetic that children are constantly abused due to the rampant cases of conflict across the country.

Also, the government has a role to play in addressing the incessant abuse of children by making sure that laws enacted against child abuse are enforced and perpetrators brought to book to serve as deterrent to others. It is expedient for lawmakers of the states that have not made law to abolish child abuse to make laws that will abolish child labour, children hawking on the streets, child brides and female genital mutilation (FGM). There should be stiff penalty for those that molest children either by sexual abuse, trafficking, human sacrifice, slavery, neglect or by other perverse means. The *Almajiri* system of education should be reformed to comply with the current best practices in education. This is a challenge to well-to-do Muslims to render financial support to the *Almajiris* to enable them desist from begging on the streets. The traditional rulers are expected to replicate children parliament at the federal level in their communities as well as making sure that relevant decisions reached by the children are implemented. Parents are encouraged to desist from sending their children to live with people in urban areas they are not sure of their character. They should avoid abandoning the

care of their children to the house helps in order to avoid their children being abused by the house helps at home.

It was high time parents started practicing family planning to enable them to bear the number of children they can cater for (Omoera 77). The church is not left out in the fight against child abuse. It has become a necessity for the church to teach its members of the need to accord children the care and dignity they deserve as a heritage and blessing from God. Christian counselors are encouraged to come to the aid of women that are victims of unwanted pregnancies so that they will not abuse their children. Again, social workers and charitable organizations and government agencies saddled with the responsibility of taking care of the less privileged, victims of disaster, displaced persons, vulnerable children to expedite action in making sure that children are given adequate care and protection during and after an armed conflict. It has become a necessity for the church to set up alternative dispute committees that will help in resolving conflict so that children will not fall victim of it.

Conclusion

As noted before, child abuse was not rampant in the pre-colonial era. Children were given protection which underscored the value people had for children. Parents and caregivers gave children care and love they deserved owing to their belief that children were created by God and they belonged to God. The traditional societies cherished children as precious gifts, heritage and reward from God which motivated the adults to refrain from abusing them. Although, parents were free to discipline their children but that was not seen as child abuse. It should be noted that during the inter-tribal wars, women and children were given protection. Each party will always ensure that their children and women that were considered the most vulnerable were protected from the holocaust. But today, the contrary has been the case, where children are massacred, and defiled, rendered homeless, starved, tortured, maltreated and subjected to all kinds of inhuman treatment. Child abuse became more pronounced as far back as colonial period when the western culture that had little or no value for children infiltrated the length and breadth of Africa with modern child abuse. The Trans-Sahara slave trade reduced children to mere property that could be purchased and disposed at will. Furthermore, the emergence of

urban cities created an opportunity for parents to send their children to live with rich and elite families that abuse them as a result of their family poor background. Every hand must be on deck to resolve numerous conflicts that bedevil this country. This will ensure that there are peace and harmony in this country where children are protected from abuse.

Works Cited

Adewale, S. A. "African Traditional Religious Teaching and Nigerian Unity." *Religious Understanding and Cooperation in Nigeria.* Ed. I.A.B. Balogun. Ijebu-Ode: Shebiotimo Publications, 1978. pp. 105-123. Print.

Alozie, C. C. "Communal Conflicts and Challenges of National Integration in Nigeria in the 21st Century." *International Journal of Social & Management Sciences* 2.1 (2019): pp. 44-57. Print.

Ali-Dinar, A. B. "*Nigeria: Irin Background Report on Communal Conflicts.*" Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, n.d.

Anugwom, E. "Ethnic Conflict and Democracy in Nigeria : The Marginalisation Question." *Journal of Social Development in Africa* 15. 1 (2000): pp. 69-75. Print.

Awosola, Rasaq K. and Omoera, Osakue S. "Child Rights and the Media: The Nigerian.

Experience." *Studies on Home and Community Science* 2.2 (2008): pp. 125-131. Print. www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09737189.20.

Brosché, J and Elfversson, E, "Communal Conflict, Civil War, and the State Complexities, Connections, and the Case of Sudan." *Accord* (2012): n.pag. Print.

Chidi, B.U. and Formella, Z, "Child Abuse in Igboland of Nigeria: Explanations, Psychological Implications and Ending the Silence." *Journal Plus Education* XIX (2018):43-44. Print.

Ede, V.I. and Kalu, D.K. "Child Abuse in Nigeria: Responses of Christian Churches and the Way Out." *International Journal for Innovative Research In Multidisciplinary Field* 4.4 (2018): pp. 46-53. Print.

Eze, E. "The Culture of Multiple Parenting in Igbo Traditional Religious Society." *International Journal of Theology and Reformed Tradition* 4(2012): pp. 74-80. Print.

Ifesieh, E .I. *Religion at the Grassroots*. Enugu: Snaap Press, 1989. Print.

Jacob, R. I. A. "Historical Survey of Ethnic Conflict in Nigeria." *Asian Social Science* 8.4(2012): pp. 15-16. Print.

Kayode, J. O., *Understanding African Traditional Religion.* Ille-Ife: University of Ife Press, 1984. Print.

Kriesch, A., Nyingi, J. et al. "Nigeria's Communal Violence: It's about more than land." n.d. n.pag. Print.

Lexico.com. "Conflict." n.pag. Print.

Mingst, Karen. "UNICEF International Organization." *Britannica*. n.d. n.pag. Print.

"Nigeria and the Children of War." *ThisDay* 17 June 2019: n. pag.

Obikeze ,D. S. "Perspectives on Child Abuse in Nigeria." *International Child Welfare Review*, 4(1984): pp. 25-26. Print.

Obioma, D. O. and Hyginus, O. M. "Socio-Ethical and Legal Implications of Child Abuse in Contemporary African Society." *Journal of Religion and Society in Africa* 1.2 (2014): pp. 113-121. Print.

Oji, R. O, Eme, O. I. "Communal Conflicts in Nigeria: An Examination of Ezillo and Ezza-Ezillo Conflict of Ebonyi State (1982-2012)." *Arabian Journal of Business and Management* Review 4.1(2014): pp. 515-524. Print.

Oha, Anthony C., Kumar, Bachchan, Anyanwu, Bibian and Omoera, Osakue S. "On Nigerian and Indian Toponyms: Socio-Cultural Divergence and Development." *World Scientific News (WSN): An International Scientific Journal* 80 (2017): pp. 268-283. http://www.worldscientificnews.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/WSN-80-2017-268-283.pdf

Okafor, E. E., "Sociological Implications of Communal and Ethno-Religious Clashes in New Democratic Nigeria." *Stud. Tribes Tribals* 5.1 (2007): pp. 16-31. Print.

Olusegun, O. O. and Idowu, A. A. "Child Abuse in Nigeria: Dimension, Reasons for its Persistence and Probable Solutions." *Child and Family Law Journal* 4.1(2016): pp. 67-80. Print.

Omede, Jacob and Andrew Abdul Omede, "Terrorism and Insecurity in Nigeria: Moral, Values and Religious Education as Panaceas." *Journal of Education and Practice* 6.11(2015): pp. 121-130. Print.

Omoera, Osakue S. "Broadcast Media in Family Planning in Rural Nigeria: The Ebelle Scenario." *Journal of Communication* 1.2 (2010): pp. 77-85. https://doi.org/10.1080/0976691X.2010.11884773

Omoera, O.S. and Awosola, R.K. "Child Abuse and Media: An Assessment of Oredo Local Government Area of Edo State, Nigeria." *Pakistan Journal of Social Sciences* 5.1 (2008): pp. 128-133. http://docsdrive.com/pdfs/medwelljournals/pjssci/2008/128-133.pdf

Omoera, Osakue S. and Ogah, Clement A. "Boko Haram as A-gent Pro-vo-ca-teur of Destruction and Destabilization in Nigeria: The Media's Check." *Brazilian Journal of African Studies* 1.1 (2016): pp. 67-84. http://www.seer.ufrgs.br/index.php/rbea/article/view/59493/37531

Stein, C. "UN: Child Abuse Prevalent in Nigeria." 2015. Web. 15 July, 2019.

UNICEF. "Child Protection." Web. 13 July 2019.