

**CHILD ABUSE AS A SET BACK ON NATION BUILDING: A STUDY OF EZZA
COMMUNITY IN EBONYI STATE, NIGERIA**

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with how child abuse can be a set back to child development and national economic development. Ezza community in Ebonyi State, Nigeria is the focus. The paper investigated the causes and effects of child abuse and how to curb the problems associated with it. Data were collected through interview and library research as well as documentaries. This paper concludes that child abuse has a debilitating effect on the psychological and emotional development of a child and efforts should be made to avoid it. It calls for good governance and a strict adherence to the cultural values of child rearing.

Key Words: Child abuse, Degradation, Emotional stability, Capacity building.

Introduction

In the African cultural context, marriage is primarily associated with child bearing. Africans go to any length in search of children. In fact, the quest for this has led most Africans to herbal homes, prayer houses and other spiritualists seeking for possible means of having children, no matter how ugly or stunted the child may be.

The arrival of a child in the average African home is always a great relief. It brings happiness to married couples and their entire relations. This happiness mostly manifests in terms of names given to the children. For instance, in Igbo-land, southeast Nigeria, we have such names like *Nwabugwu* (child is respect), *Nwakaego* (child is greater than money),

Nwamaka (Child is precious), *Nwagbogu* (child settles conflicts). Among the Yorubas, you could hear names like *Omolola* (child is wealth), *Omowumi* (I love a child), *Omodunmi* (child is good to have) and so many other related names. These names underscore the importance of having children in a family. Every child is seen as a potential leader of his society in the future and as such the child is accorded national and worldwide recognition.

Nigeria observes May 27 of every year as children's day. In 1959, the United Nations declared child's right and stated briefly that; every child has a right to affection, love and understanding. Free education, adequate nutrition and medical care, full opportunity for play and recreation, for a name and nationality, special care of the handicapped and vulnerable children should be accorded primacy in times of disaster. Children must be encouraged to learn to be useful members of the society and develop their individual abilities; they should be brought up in the spirit of peace and universal motherhood and made to enjoy those rights regardless of race, colour, sex, religion, nationality and social origin. In a related development, 1979 was declared the international year of the child (IYC). The society is also mindful of the survival, happiness, training and wellbeing of the child because the child is expected to be of great concern to all. Yet the child is denied almost all these rights. In relation to this, it is therefore pertinent to investigate why the child is often abused by those whose responsibilities are solely to protect the child.

Ezza is one of the largest, densely populated and busy communities in Ebonyi State. It produces a large proportion of locally consumed food in Ebonyi. With many other business engagements around the area, the business prospects of the place have boosted her population as a consequence of immigration.

It is observed that in this area, parents, especially traders and farmers, go to work early in the morning and come back late at night. This leaves the management of the household in the hands of maids. They do not have resources to hire house-helpers, thereby relegating their duties to their children. Moreso, child labour has become lucrative and therefore the order of the day in this area - Ezza community.

Child abuse is not a new phenomenon. World history holds it that children have been subjected to various forms of unspeakable cruelties. Experts generally agree that various forms of child abuse and maltreatment are widespread in urban areas of the state in general. The sheer fact that several arrest operations have been carried out by members of National Association for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) and government officials in Ebonyi State, is a clear indication of the level of child abuse as observed in the state. It is on the basis of this ugly state of affairs that the current study investigates the extent to which child abuse in this area has affected child development and national development generally.

Child Abuse and the Problem of Development

There is a growing public concern on child abuse in Nigeria and all over the world. Children are forced into becoming the bread winners of their families. Essentially, they appear to be contributing more than ever to alleviating household poverty, more relevant to required labour in agriculture and farm work and generally regarded as economic assets because of their potential roles and productive contributions in income generation in rural communities (Alimi, Ayanwale, Bamire & Bello, 2004). Most children in Ezza, Ebonyi State are found either working as labourers at the quarry sites hitting lumps of stones with "monday hammer", carrying wares about to enable them make family ends meet, are motor conductors and are sent out as maids to ensure the availability of resources for their schooling.

Some of them abstain from school and school activities on the market days in Ezza in order to make money and contribute to family up keep and to sustain themselves in school through hawking of groundnuts, *moi-moi*, pure water etc. These children who do all these odd jobs are supposed to be catered for by their parents. These activities are adjudged to have debilitating and consequential effects on these children and they include certain unacceptable and aberrant behaviours such as robbery, prostitution and smoking of hard drugs. Some of them are lured into militancy and as such they grow up to be social misfits in the society and stumbling block to development. Some of them, especially the females, are lured into early sex, introduced to amorous sex behaviours and most times the female ones end up being pregnant. Participation of children in household poverty reduction activities appears to be exploitative. It causes emotional instability to the abused children and deters future capacity building and national economic development. The participation and contribution to household economic contribution challenge the children's range of options for educational pursuit and the available time for studies at homes. This also poses a challenging problem as such participation and contributions are seen to be exploitative as well as having the potential of exposing the children to hazardous situations.

In the universal declaration of human rights, the United Nations declares that for any child to fully and harmoniously develop his or her potentiality and characteristics, he or she should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding (UNICEF, 2001; 2003). This notwithstanding, several children today still experience a lot of dangers, vulnerability and attacks from both the family and outside. They face maltreatment, neglect, violence, malnutrition, torture, child murder and ritual, various forms of cruelty and infanticide. International Labour Organization (ILO), in Ebigbo (1990), reports that about ten million African children under 15 years of age are abused. In like circumstance, United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reports that at least sixteen (16) million African children of not more than 13 years of age are working for long hours, yet they are underfed and underpaid in the process. These reports on child abuse, and many more, have debilitating and long lasting side effects and feeling of neglect, distress, trauma and emotional instability and derailment in growth and development on the abused children and the nation at large. It therefore necessitates an investigation into the effects of these abuses on the children upbringing and future capacity building.

The purpose of this study is to identify the incidences, forms, causes and effects of child abuse as it poses threat to human capacity development in Ezza community in particular and the nation at large. The investigation will enable governments at all levels to formulate policies and future reforms and laws that will be useful in curbing this cancerous problem in capacity development in children.

Method

Data for this investigation are mostly from interviews conducted by the researchers on the children found on the streets hawking wares, some children in some total institutions such as remand homes, penal homes, special schools, case files and documentaries. Fifty children (50) and ten (10) parents were purposively selected and interviewed on issues relating to causes, forms, effects and remedies to child abuse. Fifty case files were investigated from total institutions, social welfare offices, police case files etc in Ezza within the period 2000 - 2004. Analysis was through per centages and inferences as well as content analysis.

Child Abuse, Capacity Building and National Development

Child abuse is seen by UNICEF (2003) as that portion of harm inflicted on children that results from human action or inaction, intended or unintended, which is proscribed and preventable. Child abuse therefore, involves any intentional, unintentional, however well intended the acts may be, that inflict dangers on the physical, emotional, moral, psychological and educational well-being of the child, and which under normal circumstances, are not acceptable to the society. Different forms of child abuse have been known to exist. According to Anukam (1978), forms of child abuse range from child abandonment, Child labour, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, infanticide, physical abuse, street hawking, educational deprivation, verbal abuse, therapeutic abuse and child trafficking. Child abandonment results from the socio-psychological fear of harbouring an unwanted baby (Elmer, 1979).

An abandoned child is one that is deserted and deprived by his parents. He is deprived of warmth, comfort, care, and cuddling by the biological mother and consequently deprived of normal mental and psychological development. Ruther (1972) observes that extreme mental deprivation could lead to affectionless psychopathic behaviours. A mother is seen as an agent (house) that alleviates tension associated with psychological drives. The satisfaction of the basic psychological needs of a child such as love, affection, affiliation and security are derived through maternal interaction.

Child labour implies exploitation of children, premature assumption of adult roles by the children, working long hours for low wages etc. These damage the physical and psychosocial health of the children and result to denial of opportunities for the children education and recreation. Thus, children join the workforce in their early years as a compulsion for their own and that of their families survival. Child labour occurs when a child is made to engage in a regular basis in some productive income yielding activities for which the primary beneficiaries are persons other than himself. Child labour refers to any physical or mental exertion of body undertaken wholly or in part by any person below the age of 15 years with a view to some reward, which could be in cash or in kind, for the person or for any other person. It is also any physical engagement of the child in either paid or unpaid job usually in order to alleviate adult burden inside or outside the home, or help the adult make living. Abused children have fewer contacts with their parents, relatives, neighbours or friends and engage in fewer social or recreational activities. Street children are young boys and girls often seen roaming about in towns, car parks, gambling places, cinema theatres etc. Some of these children are immoral, others vagrants and wanderers with the intention to commit crime. They are usually seen with tattered dresses, dirty oily cloths and look un-kept and unhealthy. They are usually between the ages of 5-18 years old. Among the Hausas for instance, street children are those helping their relations to beg but virtually all children in the streets go home at the end of the day and have some places or families where they belong (Dyorrough, 1986).

Cases abound of incidences of child abuse in Nigeria. The Guardian Wednesday March 3, 1999 revealed that the police in Lagos held a woman who allegedly attempted to sell her four months old son for two hundred thousand naira (=N=200,000.00).

The National Center for Child Abuse (1978) sees child sexual abuse as any form or act of carnal knowledge of a child, or with a child performed by parents or caretaker, or any elderly person without the child's consent and understanding. There appears to be more cases of child sexual abuse Involving caretakers than parents. At times masters provide necessary items to entice young girls approaching puberty and who are under their care. This is why in most cases wives insist that house girls living with them go back to their parents on reaching

puberty to save them from embarrassment, and also for fear of pregnancies. However, sexual abuse could unfold the other way round where a woman sexually abuses a young boy in her care like the Biblical Joseph and Pharaoh's wife. Rape and seduction also form part of sexual abuses to children.

According to Kinard (1979), emotional abuse refers to an injury to a child's psychological self, just as physical abuse consists of injury to the child's body. Its intention and effects may be punitive or a corrective measure. Emotional abuse is generally experienced as a result of parental hostility or rejection. It can come as a result of verbal criticism of a child's failure to meet unrealistic expectations or standards for his or her performance.

According to Radbill (1980) it was widely believed in ancient times that infants had no rights until the right to live was virtually bestowed upon them by their fathers. In like manner, Robin (1980) noted that infanticide was widely accepted among ancient pre-historic cultures. Infants could be put to death because they cried too much, they were sickly, deformed, had infections, were perceived to be socio-economic liabilities or were curses from the gods. The girl-child, twins and children of unmarried ladies were the targets of infanticide. Barton (1976), identified physical abuse to include pushing the child, pinching, slapping, flogging the child, and asking the child to kneel down for unending hours with raised hands, beating the child to a point of unconsciousness, burning a part of the child's body, pouring cold or hot water on the child, pushing the child against hard objects etc. In recent times, the Pentecostal churches have been noted to have abused Nigerian children, by declaring them as witches, *ogbanje*, *abiku*, etc and in the pretext of 'curing' them, inflicted physical injuries on them. Cases abound where some accused children have been poured acids, burnt, pinched with hard and piercing objects etc. Emotional child abuse is indicated by all physical injuries generally considered to be deliberately inflicted on any child by a caretaker or parent(s). It is the easiest form of abuse to identify because the injuries are often visible even to the untrained observer.

Child abuse dates back to antiquity. The Bible records in Exodus chapter 2 verses 3, that Moses' mother abandoned him by the riverside to save him from king Pharaoh's slaughter. Also, there was the slaughter of all male Israelites (children) by Herold because he was told by the three wise men that a king of the Jews, other than himself, was born. Rachael's sons were among those slain, and she lamented very greatly for the loss and could not be comforted because none was left for her (Matthew 3: 18). Male children in Spartan, according to history, were taken over from their parents by the government at the age of seven and were subjected to serious military and endurance training. This perhaps is perceived to be child abuse.

As noted above, the joy of womanhood is the presence of a child and as such the denial of pregnancy and conceiving in Africa and Nigeria in particular means suicide. That explains the reason why people could go to any extent in search of a child, the fruit of marriage. When children are dehumanized, humiliated and abused in whatever form it is the womanhood that is invariably being humiliated, demoralized, underdeveloped and abused.

Aniekwensi et al (1991) reported that child abuse was rampant as early as 10th century down to the period of industrial revolution. Quoting the book; 'Minor of Rebert Blincoe' by Doherty (1832, 342) as a demonstration of the abused condition of English children during the earlier part of industrial revolution, Aniekwensi et al (1991) reported that the under-aged children employed in factories had to adapt their actions to the pace of the machines. Any boy

that was too slow and held up things was savagely beaten up. Accordingly accidents were common, Blincoe's limbs got crushed in a machine, yet he was not allowed to stop working. An annual estimate of one million cases of child abuse and two thousand (2,000) deaths was made in 1972 in England (Aniekwensi et al, 1991). The author also reported cases of children dropping out of school for lucrative options like mining and selling of gold and diamond in Ghana. These children bring money in town from various sources without question from their parents. All these constitute child abuse.

In all these, the children also receive the blow and are traumatized, de-humanized, mal-treated etc. They are denied and are placed in delicate situations where their potentials, capacities and intellect are not identified, harnessed, articulated and developed for themselves and for subsequent contributions to national socio-economic development. Should the children be held responsible?

A glance at our dailies meets with horrible captions such as: "SATANIC: Kidnappers kill 10-year-old victim, severe organs... after collecting ransom" (The Leader, Sunday November 30, 2008: 19); "Two Month-Old Baby Stolen In Church" (The Leader, Sunday January 18, 2009: 1); "18 - Month Baby Strangled To Death By Suspected Ritualist ... In Imo" The Leader, Sunday May 31, 2009: 18); "Kidnapping: Politicians, Businessmen Take Refuge in Hotels, Relocate Families" (The Leader, Sunday June 28, 2009: 1) and many more. In mid June, 2009, four children were reported stolen in a church in Aba, Abia State. Early 2008, a day old baby was abandoned in a gutter along Orlu Road, near Federal Medical Centre, Owerri. These reports horrify children and parents to the extent that there is fear of insecurity of lives and movement is strictly restricted. This hinders socio-economic development and the psychological growth of the child in particular.

Results and Discussion

In a question to identify the causes of child abuse in the society, majority of the respondents affirmed that poverty (52%) and cultural and religious practices (28%) are the major causes. The respondents opined that since the parents are poor, they find it difficult to meet their financial needs and so they are sent out to hawk, beg and serve as maids as their contributions to poverty alleviation in the family. Most of them did not understand the implications or dangers they are exposed to in the process. They see their engagements as an immediate solution to their financial predicaments.

On whether they have time for studies in the home, they acknowledged that they were always fagged out at the end of the day. Some of them rather said they use the rest of the day watching video films. They still acknowledged that these engagements robbed them the opportunities for advancement in their education and hence, capacity building. This confirms Alimi et al (2004) assertion on the effects of street hawking on children. One of the parents interviewed confirmed that he would rather sell his child instead of watching him die of hunger. He said... "I m ready to keep my son alive, if there is no money to feed him, he will die and it would be better he is sold away to someone who would take care of him". Asked if he envisaged any danger or mishap to the child he sold, his answer indicated that of an ignorant parent.

On the cultural and spiritual dimensions, the children abused could not see how they were regarded as witches, curses or liabilities to parents since they have not been given the right training and opportunities to fully develop themselves. The stigma rather traumatizes them and subjects them to feelings of failures (53%) in the society. Probably, if they are rather

directed to existing opportunities, they would rise to any height. And like one of the children and a parent asked: “What proof does any one have that these children are curses, *ogbanje or abiku?*” “Are we sure that what is regarded a curse may not be a failure on the part of the parents?”

Some parents interviewed averred that they indulge in what is regarded as child abuse because they cannot afford the high cost of education in the country (64%). Some of them feel that their children are not properly taken care of in the public schools where teachers are not properly paid, school buildings are dilapidated and not maintained etc. yet they are expected to pay exorbitant school fees. On why they cannot send the children to learn trade instead, about 40% of them said that such measures do not yield fast money and that children of these days do not want to learn any trade (45%). One of the parents, a woman, annoyingly said, “... how can our politicians make fast money, ride big cars, build big houses etc and expect us to remain poor all through our lives? We have to compete with them in our own way”. It is inferred from this that the respondents do not understand the implication of these feelings and the dangers such value conceptions have on the cultural and value systems in the society. This could explain the sudden up-turn in the society’s value system, the ‘get – rich – quick mania’ and the loss of focus on entrepreneurship, and the sudden engagement by some in child trafficking and other abuses. The statement also implicates the poor governance in our country, especially its negligence on education, human capacity building, people’s inability to access productive assets and exploration on alternative / diversified economic resource (Alimi et al, 2004; Lambrou & Piana, 2006).

On the effects of child abuse on the children, the society and the nation at large, it was observed that most children felt bad about their conditions, blaming the leadership in the country for masterminding their trauma. Some of them (40%) opined that if poverty in the land is ameliorated they would not be abused to the extent of asking them to hawk or get into prostitution. Such involvement deters their educational career (35%), human capacity building (40%), their future contribution to economic development (20%). The physical and emotional harm they experience subjects them to feelings of rejection, abandonment etc to the extent that they regret being born into the world. However, some of the parents could not make categorical statement on the effects since they exculpated themselves, blaming the situation on the general economic situation. Some of them who gave out their children as maids overseas never knew what jobs their children went out to do. This confirms Aborishade and Aderinto, (2009) study in which they observed that those (traffickers) who took their children for work outside were close relatives. They had the least suspicion as to the veracity of what those custodians told them at the time of recruitment of the children into sex work. While some of the parents realized the implications of their children engaging in hawking on market days, stone quarrying, prostitution, house service etc, they requested that government should open up alternatives for skills development.

From the investigation, the forms of child abuse range from physical injury and harm, child labour, child abandonment mostly from divorced homes, prostitution, child trafficking, child stealing and abduction (The Leader, January 18, 2009: 1), negligence, slave labour, hawking and street trading, touting and bus conducting (Atere et al, 2008) to poor child care.

Table 1 shows reported cases of child abuse in Ezza community within the period of 2000 – 2004 as contained in case files of the security department of law enforcement agency, the police (i.e., the Juvenile Welfare Unit), social welfare, remand homes, orphanages and homes involving adults or otherwise who were subjected to one form of abuse or the other

when they were younger. It is observed that out of a total number of 50 cases investigated, police report has 30% while orphanages and the homes had 20% each. It was also observed that except in tortuous situations where parents or the abused were seriously affected or the affected was knowledgeable no attempts were made to officially report the cases. Most people resorted to amicable settlement.

Table 1: Distribution of Reported Cases of Child Abuse in the Study Area

SOURCES	YEAR/PERIOD	LEVEL OF INVOLVEMENT IN %	NO. OF CASES
SOCIAL WELFARE	2000-2004	18.00%	9
REMAND HOME	2000-2004	12.00%	6
POLICE	2000-2004	30.00%	15
ORPHANAGE	2000-2004	20.00%	10
HOMES	2000-2004	20.00%	10
TOTAL		100.00%	50

The remedies suggested from the investigation were that there should be a moral rejuvenation among parents to understand that children are unquantifiable gifts from God and that they should do everything to cater for their needs. The age-long society's values on children should be upheld. The Igbo, southeast of Nigeria names such as Nwakaego (child is greater than wealth/money) and Uba awughi nwa (wealth cannot surpass children) clearly explain the premium on children and child rearing. The investigation observes the need for government to provide funds for poverty alleviation to pragmatically take care of economic empowerment (27%), provide for vocational training, skills enhancement, provision for work tools and initial take – off capital for new entrants into trade and entrepreneurship (55%). This is adjudged to enable the children to contribute to national economic development. The findings are in tandem with the observations of Ebigbo (1990), Alimi et al, (2004), Lambrou & Piana (2006), Atere et al, (2008) and The Leader, June 21, (2009: 3).

Conclusion

This study explored the causes, forms and effects of child abuse, using Ezza community in Ebonyi State as focus. It observed that there is high rate of child abuse in the area and that the effects impact so much on the psychology and development of the children abused. Though the study is not a comparative investigation and the community used is regarded as rural, the findings are revealing. Government is advised to improve on governance and to make sustainable and pragmatic provisions for its poverty alleviation programme to include economic empowerment. There is need for laws to take care of child abuse and to ensure that every child of school age is in school. There is also the need to revive the cultural values on child rearing to curtail the rate of child abuse. Aggressive media campaigns are necessary in this regard.

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