

Exploring the Forms of Child Abuse in Nigeria: Efforts at Seeking Appropriate Preventive Strategies

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CHILD ABUSE IN THE NIGERIAN SOCIETY

It may be difficult discussing the issue of child abuse in Nigeria without eliciting the African perspective. This is because first as Africans (and later developing nations), there exists a common heritage that seem to signify that similarities in culture or traditions may indicate a commonality of perceptions toward issues regarded as child abuse and eventually, similarities in strategies for addressing the problem.

Moving into the African or Nigerian Perspective

It is quite a formidable task formulating an effective strategy for the prevention of child abuse. To tackle this problem Marzouki (2002) made an interesting comparison between prevention strategies for child abuse or handicaps and medical management:

What measures should be taken to avoid the so-called 'street children' phenomenon? The preventive measures in handicap are different from medical management in type and level. For instance, when a child has a cerebral palsy due to prematurity, he would need drugs and physiotherapy. But preventing prematurity would need, among other things, health education and pregnancy monitoring. Like cerebral palsy, or seizures, sexually abused street children are merely a symptom, but the causes are derived from elsewhere. Of course it [is] the symptoms that have to be dealt with in an attempt to help the children whose cases require special intervention due to the urgent and often difficult circumstances.

While Marzouki (2002), concentrates on the need to look at the symptoms to help abused children with proper intervention strategies, this paper still believes in the need to also understand

the precipitating factors for child abuse. For it is, only when these factors are identified that one can decipher the focus groups for intervention strategies and forestall future occurrences.

Before one can plan effective strategies, it is pertinent for planners to be conversant with basic child rights as stated by for instance the African Charter which recognises the fact that the rights of most African children are disregarded due to irreconcilable factors that pivot on hunger, exploitation, armed conflicts, natural disasters, their socio-economic, cultural, traditional and developmental conditions. With this, it is crucial to look at those rights in the African Charter cited in Marzouki (2002) whose implementation in Nigeria would assist in preventing rampant cases of child abuse.

(1) *The Socio-Economic Rights:*

The right to survival (Article 5), the right to health (Article 14), the right to education (Article 11), the right to be protected from all form of economic exploitation, (Article 15), the right to leisure, recreation and cultural activities (Article 17), and the right to special measures of protection in case of handicap (Article 13).

The rising cases of corruption by African leaders both within military and erstwhile conceived sanitising democratic regimes with a rich nation like Nigeria as a case in point, means that the rights and future of children are endangered since limited resources is invested in such ventures as education, better or accessible health care and employment.

(2) *The Political Rights:*

The right to non-discrimination (Article 3), right to freedom of expression (Article 7), the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion (Article 9), the right to freedom of association (Article 8), the right to be protected against torture (Article 16), the right to be protected against harmful social and cultural practices (Article 21), the right to be

protected in case of armed conflict, tension and strife (Article 22), and the right of protection of privacy (Article 10).

Given the persistent problems of military dictatorship and utter disregard for the democratic principles of freedom of speech, association, thought and fair trials, one wonders how African states that nonchalantly violate basic human rights could adopt appropriate measures for the protection of its maltreated children.

(3) The Private or Personal Rights:

The right to a name and nationality (Article 6), the right to a protected and united family (Article 18), the right to parental care and protection (Article 19), the right to procedures protecting the best interests in case of adoption (Article 24), the right to be protected against sexual exploitation (Article 27), drug abuse (Article 28), sole trickery and adoption (Article 29), and the right to fair trial and special condition of detention in case of crime (Article 17).

These rights appear feasible on paper but how would they be implemented? For instance, how many children have access to education, health facilities and even leisure especially when states are charged with deducing measures for endorsing and defending child welfare? What factors also constitute measures of appropriate welfare provision?

It may be deduced therefore, that when one considers the problems of extreme poverty and dysfunctional democratic ideals impeding the advancement of the Nigerian child, one may not be too hasty to condemn the gains of child labour as a survival strategy for some children who do not have the state, community or parents to rely on.

With the preceding, it is evident that Nigerians have been paying lip service to prevention of child abuse for appropriate prevention of child abuse should touch on the primary level of complex political, economic, cultural and social problems stimulating child abuse. When primary instead of secondary prevention measures come to bear in the Nigerian environment, this should be heralded by increased education of the masses, political lobbying, formulation of new laws and economic measures all targeted at protecting the Nigerian child.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM)

Indigenous practices of Female Genital Mutilation come in different forms. These are: the simple removal of the clitoral hood or labia minora, the excision of the clitoris and the dangerous act of infibulation. The age at which Female Genital Mutilation could be performed also varies from the first week of a female baby's birth to after a woman delivers her first baby.

In the past, the private sector constituting mainly Non-Governmental Organisations and Women Groups spearheaded the campaign against Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) which was supported by government officials especially those with the Ministry of Health. Presently, while the Government publicly denounces female genital mutilation because of the physical and psychological health and emotional hazards to the victims, no known legal action has been taken to eradicate the practice.

Female genital mutilation is practiced by about 33% of all households across ethnic and religious groups, in all parts of the country but with a prime rate in the eastern and southern regions. Further, studies on the issue conducted by the World Health Organisation and the United Nations Development Systems estimated the prevalence of Female Genital Mutilation at approximately 60% of Nigeria's female population. Even as there are variations among researchers, local experts put the prevalence rate as high as 90%. Nevertheless, with the awareness been created by International and indigenous organisations, women's groups and the press especially at the community level on the detrimental effects of this practice, recent data show a decline in the number of females subjected to female genital mutilation (AFROL Gender Profile-Nigeria: 2002).

Child Labour

There is an active trade in children both within and outside the country. This totally deviates from the traditional African culture of handing over children from indigent families to live with relations that are more affluent. With the old practice, a silent trade by barter is achieved whereby the child assists in the household chores while the affluent relative trains the child for a brighter future. What obtains today is that

probably due to poverty, parents in the rural areas hand over their children to urban dwellers who most often fail to put them through school rather using them as unpaid servants or street hawkers. Child labour is a problem faced in many developing countries and the harrowing experiences of affected children reeks of gory stories of road accidents or inhuman treatment (such as the chopping of hands, starvation or bathing with oil or hot water) meted out by their 'madams' and 'ogas' (their present guardians).

Even more disheartening is the fact that child labour has escalated to the level where young children are used for money making rituals and more recently, the Niger Delta disparaged the active trade in child labourers to Cameroon, Gabon, Benin and Equatorial Guinea where the males work in agricultural enterprises while the females are enticed into prostitution. As proof, in January 2002, the Cote D'Ivoire authorities deported a number of 10-year-old girls from Abidjan to Lagos State. Further, a trade route used by traffickers of child labourers was uncovered that went through Katsina and Sokoto to the Middle East and East Africa. Plus, Dutch officials intercepted what may have been an organised smuggling of about 12 children within a 5-month period from November 1998 to March 2002 (AFROL Gender Profile-Nigeria: 2002). Table 1, summarises information on major child trafficking routes.

Table 1: Major child trafficking routes

<i>Major Child Trafficking Routes</i>
• From Latin America to North America, Europe and the Middle East; • From countries of the former Soviet bloc to the Baltic States and Western Europe; • From Romania to Italy, and through Turkey and Cyprus to Israel and the Middle East; • From West Africa to the Middle East; from Thailand and the Philippines to Australia, New Zealand and Taiwan; • From Cambodia, Myanmar, and Viet Nam to Thailand; • From Nepal and Bangladesh to India; and from India and Pakistan to the Middle East.

Source: United States Fund for UNICEF (2002) Child Trafficking.

Although there are still situations where children going into service as domestic servants meet appreciative households who afford them opportunities to acquire even a University Degree, generally, the bane of child labour is that

the future of innocent and unconsenting children lie in the hands of often heartless task masters.

Female or Child Trafficking

The United Nations General Assembly cited in UNICEF (2002) defined trafficking as the:

...illicit and clandestine movement of persons across national and international borders, largely from developing countries and some countries with economies in transition with the end goal of forcing women and girl children into sexually or economically oppressive and exploitative situations for the profit of recruiters, traffickers, crime syndicates, as well as other illegal activities related to trafficking, such as forced domestic labour, false marriages, clandestine employment and false adoption.

The same UNICEF (2002) report indicates that child trafficking is to fulfil certain purposes: sexual exploitation; adoption; child labour (such as: domestic work, begging, criminal work like selling drugs); participation in armed conflicts; and marriage.

There have been reported cases of trafficking in women and children for illegitimate purposes. While the nature and magnitude of the trade has remained vastly unknown, immigration officials throughout Europe have reported an influx of Nigerian females ensnared and sold into prostitution in such European countries as the Netherlands, Italy, and the Czech Republic. For instance, in 2001, Italian officials deported hundreds of commercial sex workers to Nigeria; Spanish officials deported 16 such workers while other European countries have deported similar numbers. Also based on the narratives of some young deportees, there are assertions that some Nigerian crime syndicates have employed "indebtedness, threats of beatings and/or rape, physical injury to the victim's family, arrest and deportation to persuade those forced into sex work from attempting to escape." (AFROL Gender Profile-Nigeria: 2002). Table 2, summarises information on child trafficking or labour.

Table 2: Statistics on child trafficking or labour

<i>Statistics on Child Trafficking or Labour</i>
• Between 5,000 and 7,000 Nepali girls are trafficked every year across the border to India. Most of them end up as sex workers in brothels in Bombay and New Delhi. An estimated 200,000 Nepali women, most of them girls under 18, work in Indian cities. • An estimated 10,000 women and girls from neighbouring countries have been lured into commercial sex establishments in Thailand. Recent Thai Government policy to eradicate child prostitution means that fewer girls are being trafficked from Northern Thailand and more girls and women are brought from Myanmar, southern China, Laos and Cambodia. • China's Public Security Bureau reported 6,000 cases of trafficking of children in 1997, with a steady increase in girls aged 14 and 15. (Oxfam) • UNICEF estimates that 1,000 to 1,500 Guatemalan babies and children a year are trafficked for adoption by foreign couples in North America and Europe. • Girls as young as 13 (mainly from Asia and Eastern Europe) are trafficked as "mail-order brides." In most cases these girls and women are powerless and isolated and at risk of violence • Large numbers of children are being trafficked in West and Central Africa, mainly for domestic work but also for sexual exploitation, to work in shops or on farms, to be scavengers or street hawkers. Nearly 90 percent of these trafficked domestic workers are girls. • Children from Togo, Mali, Burkina Faso and Ghana are trafficked to Nigeria, Ivory Coast, Cameroon and Gabon. Children are trafficked both in and out of Benin and Nigeria. Some children are sent as far away as the Middle East and Europe.

Source: United States Fund for UNICEF (2002) Child Trafficking.

Interestingly, while society may abhor the practice of child trafficking, there is the indication that it originated from the African attitude of sending young people to live with affluent relatives thus pointing to the fact that prevention strategies should begin at the community level.

Early Marriages

Many Nigerians have witnessed successive governments disparaging the various practices that constitute abuse and neglect of children. However, these governments especially the democratically elected ones have done nothing to stop those traditional practices such as early sale of the girl child for marriage. While some studies report that female children are given away in marriage before attaining puberty as a means of preventing the licentious act of

premarital sex, others report that early marriages are strategies adopted by poor families to supplement negligible incomes (AFROL Gender Profile-Nigeria: 2002).

All the same, it follows that such early marriages, constitute the greatest abuse to the girl child for they lead: to early pregnancies which these young ones are ill-developed to carry; higher infant mortality and death rates; and higher mother complications or even death during delivery.

Street Children or Child Beggars

Williams (1993) explains that literature on street children recognises that these children differ in relation to experiences leading them to live on the streets. In this wise, three (3) distinctions are drawn based on: children at risk, children in the street and children of the street. There is a further distinction based on the level of contact that these children maintain with their families.

Godoy (1999) laments that it is indeed sad that with labels such as "street children," we contribute to misconceptions that some of these children lead deviant existences whereas, their case could be caused by impoverished and vulnerable living conditions in which violence and abuse may have become an accepted way of life. She adds that the only thing that could be considered deviant about street children is that they take up visible residence in public places where middle and upper class society would acknowledge their presence and do something to alleviate their plight. Also related, Biehal, Clayden, Stein and Wade cited in Joe Francis (2000: 25) reported that children especially those in institutional care often complain about the undesirable effect of labelling by professionals who see them as "troublemakers" or "no-hopers," this increases their resilience to change since they are not often provided with opportunities to do well.

Finally, when one considers the Nigerian environment where little girls act as guides to blind beggars or young boys are seen living on the fall outs of refuse bins, it is apparent that these children have learnt to adjust to circumstances to which they have been born into or forced to blend into.

CONCLUSIONS

Indeed, a brief highlight of some forms of child abuse existing in Nigeria clearly indicate that the same strategies for tackling the problem of neglect and maltreatment in developed countries cannot be assumed to be applicable to or even have similar success rates in a developing country such as Nigeria. This may also be because children in developed countries, especially the African continent, have been brought up to be overtly submissive to their parents in everything that includes decisions on what should be appropriate (whether right or wrong) for their future growth and development. In other words, unlike in developed countries, children can freely call in welfare officials to report cases of abuse or parental neglect without fear of parental or societal retribution. However, Nigerian children are less open about their plight and would gladly endure the trauma of female genital mutilation or child labour rather than face been labelled by society as "those ungrateful children that sold their parents out to welfare officers."

Undoubtedly, forms and causes of child abuse and neglect differ from country to country and should be isolated by child advocacy professionals before proffering laudable strategies for their prevention. When children are addressed, one should not be too hasty with lauding the effectiveness of any child abuse

preventive strategy over the other especially if none of the selected strategies eventually have little impact in solving the problem.

KEYWORDS Child abuse; intervention strategies; female or child trafficking; female genital mutilation; early girl marriage; child beggars

ABSTRACT Quite often, in addressing the problems of child abuse in Nigeria as with other developing countries, policy makers and child advocacy professionals have adopted intervention strategies derived from research conducted in foreign or developed countries. The effect is that these foreign-based interventions have been ineffective in tackling problems of child abuse in developing countries. It is the goal of this paper therefore, to present the distinctive forms of child abuse in Nigeria as a first step towards determining appropriate intervention strategies for curtailing their prevalence.

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