CHILD ABUSE IN NIGERIA: A HINDRANCE TO PERSONAL AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

Development is one thing that is vital to both man and states/nations. Humans, irrespective of their skin colour and physique, and nations, regardless of their size and location, all pant for development. But there are obstacles to development at both personal and national levels. Child abuse is, of course, one of the obstacles, an obstacle that greatly hinders or affects personal and national development. How child abuse hinders the development of the Nigerian state, and affects the lives of its victims mainly is what this study tries to establish. In doing so, however, secondary data is basically used.

Keywords: Child abuse, Nigeria, Hindrance, Development

Introduction

Like it is stated in the abstract section, development of some societies/states and some individuals as well is partly under suffocation because of child abuse. Child abuse [which encapsulates physical abuse or child maltreatment, infliction of emotional distress or trauma upon a child, child labour, sexual harassment, child marriage, etc.] is a problem that confronts almost every state regardless of the continent they are found or their level of development/advancement in science and technology. However, child abuse is very rampant in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular as a result of this common factor – POVERTY.

Poverty, or rather, extreme poverty is real in Nigeria and because of this some families who consider the harshness of the poverty unbearable, compromise the future of their young ones or children. The primary reasons for the compromise are the need for survival and the weakness or the failure of legal means established by the Nigerian government to protect child (Bass, 2004 in Onyido and Vareba, 2019:44).

Howbeit, most of the families who engage in child abuse lack the true knowledge of the fact that using children for survival has its own resultants; they, through their actions, unknowingly jeopardize the future of the young minds, a future that Nigeria will someday benefit from, a future that is sacrosanct for the development of the country. They are also unaware, as Ede and Kalu (2018:46) put it, that children are the bedrock of any society and the greatest assurance of the continuity of human race. Children, unknown to them, are the prime reason for our visualization of tomorrow.
Without them categorically, our tomorrow’s society becomes a mirage, a hallucination. Very importantly, there are concepts we need to fathom first before we could jump into exploring how child abuse affects personal and national development in Nigeria. Some of the concepts are child abuse and development. Also, justice would not be done to the topic, if we leave some cases of child abuse in different Nigerian states and communities unmentioned or under-discussed.

**Child Abuse**

The world houses billions of people of different cultures, traditions and religions who see things mainly from the lens of their respective cultural and religious beliefs. What is considered child abuse in America and Europe for example, might be far from that in Africa as well as Asia. The educated and uneducated also view child abuse differently. Thus, disagreement over what should and what should not be considered child abuse becomes inevitable.

However, Edu and Edu, in their 1999 article presented at the First Zonal Conference of the National Association of Women Academics at the University of Uyo, Akwa Ibom State and titled “Child Abuse in Nigeria: Its Impacts on Child Development”, considered child abuse as a voluntary or willful maltreatment of a child. The maltreatment itself, the duo note, could be acts of commission (abuse) and omission (neglect) (see Akpan and Oluwabamide, 2010:189).

According to Child Welfare Information Gateway (CWIG), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Children’s Bureau, child abuse means “the physical injury on neglect, mental injury, sexual abuse, sexual exploitation, or maltreatment of a child under age 18 by a person under circumstances that indicate that the child’s health or welfare is harmed or threatened”. In addition, it involves the act of allowing, permitting or encouraging a minor/child to engage in prostitution; the failure of a child’s parent(s) or guardian to provide for his basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, and emotional and medical care; and any act that results in serious bruising, bleeding, malnutrition, fracture of a bone, or death of a child. The death, in particular, is deemed child abuse when it is not the result of an accidental occurrence.

Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), as cited in CWIG, defined child abuse as “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caregiver that results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act that presents an imminent risk of serious harm”.

According to CWIG also, the following three categories of people are the ones responsible for a child’s welfare and can also be held responsible when child abuse occurs:

- The child’s parent, guardian, or foster parent;
- The person responsible for a child’s care at the time of the alleged child abuse or neglect; and
- The person responsible for the child’s welfare in a public or private residential agency or institution.
Child abuse in Nigeria’s context

Several forms of child abuse exist in different Nigerian communities. Seven major forms of child abuse in the country, as listed by Ede and Kalu (2018:46-48), are: child labour, child abandonment, vagrancy, sexual abuse, girl child marriage, child trafficking, and female genital mutilation.

- **Child Labour:** This is the turning of children below the age of eighteen into “money making machine”. Rather than sending a child to school for personal development, those in whom they are under their care subject them to street and road hawking, begging, apprenticeship, salon work, loading and offloading of vehicles, etc., which at times runs from dawn to dusk. One ugly thing about this is that the children who are victims of child labour are hardly fed well by those they work for even before they are being sent to the tedious work of, for example, hawking under the sun and rain. However it should be noted that some parents or guardians who are a bit humane send the children to afternoon or evening schools after hawking or working in the morning. But, this is even unpalatable, as morning hours are periods suitable for learning.

- **Child Abandonment:** This is the act of deserting, forsaking or throwing a baby away by usually the mother. This normally occurs from “unwanted pregnancy”. When a woman who is unmarried but gets pregnant or is raped and she manages to carry the pregnancy without aborting it, she usually throws the baby away at birth or some months after, especially when she sees frustration and ignominy from friends and family unbearable. Some women who give birth to abnormal babies also cast them away for the shame of being identified as the mother of the imbecile child for example, and for the stress that will accompany the training of such a baby.

- **Vagrancy:** Home is one thing that many vagrants lack. Street is the home of many of them. They are usually without parents. In the Northern part of Nigeria vagrants are considered or called the *Almajiri*. Some of them don’t have or know their parents and siblings. They are usually victims of evil, as lovers of wrong-doing like to utilize them to orchestrate or perpetrate evil in exchange for food, clothes and shelter.

- **Sexual Abuse:** This is basically the use of a minor to satisfy one’s libido or to engage him/her in prostitution for generation of income. To Martin (1993) in Ede and Kalu (2018), child sexual abuse include any act of “asking or pressuring a child to engage in sexual activities”, “indecent exposure of the genitals to a child”, “displaying pornography to a child”, “actual sexual contact with a child”, “physical contact with the child’s genitals”, “viewing of the child’s genitalia without physical contact”, or “using a child to produce child pornography”.

- **Girl Child Marriage:** In advance countries they encounter mostly the issue of disparage; that is, inequality in marriage or marriage with a commoner. But in Africa and in many parts of Nigeria we encounter the issue of child marriage. Some parents and guardians, in Northern Nigeria particularly, receive dowries and give their young children’s hand in marriage not minding whether or not they would be able to cope with it. In the Southern part, many
“push” their children into early marriage as soon as they notice they are pregnant, not minding the circumstances surrounding the pregnancy.

- **Child Trafficking:** Ede and Kalu (2018) considered this as “the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt of children for the purpose of exploitation”. Child traffickers at times kidnap and lure many children out of their homes and transport them to both far and near cities or countries where they would be used for one purpose or the other. Edo, Akwa Ibom, Imo, Lagos among others have recorded series of cases of child trafficking.

- **Female Genital Mutilation:** World Health Organization (WHO) defines this as “procedures that intentionally alter or cause injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons”. For ease of comprehension, female genital mutilation is the circumcision of a girl child mainly for cultural reasons. It is, however, child abuse; it is a violation of human rights of girls in particular and women in general.

**Development**

Every effort to give “development” a single, universally accepted definition has been a debacle because of the controversies that arise any time the concept is being discussed. Some people, in fact, view development as, or measure it in terms of changes in gross national product (GNP) per capita and comparative GNPs between countries. Thus when the GNP of a state is increasing, they tagged such a state a real “developing state”. In other words, some people view economic development or growth as development (Griffiths and O’Callaghan, 2002:75; and Nwosu, 2013).

In 1971 W.W. Rostow viewed development, from the angle of Social Darwinism, as “a process of evolutional succession in stages, where human societies leave a rudimentary model until they arrive at a Western industrialized civilization consumption model, which is considered unique and universal” (see Jair and Rogério, 2008:107). Apart from this, some scholars argue that development must be relative to ‘time’, ‘place’ and ‘circumstance’, and dismiss any universal formula. The reason for this is that the development needs of a state under the siege of hunger, starvation and extreme poverty will be far different from those of a state which has a very small number of poor and starving citizens (see Iain and Alistair, 2003:148; and Abuiyada, 2018:115).

In our context however, personal development has to do with continuous betterment or improvement and the use of individual’s potentials for the overall advancement of the society he lives in. It also has to do with probity, freedom and self-discipline. National development on the other hand has to do with mitigation of these three main national problems viz. poverty, unemployment and inequality. In support of the above, Rodney, in his 1972 publication captioned How Europe Underdeveloped Africa, notes:

“Development in human society is a many-sided process. At the level of the individual it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being...”

(cited in Nwosu, 2013:3).

Seer (1969 & 1972) avers:
“Development means the conditions for realization of human personality... The questions to ask about a country’s development are therefore, what has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality? If all three of these have declined from higher levels, then beyond doubt this has been a period of development for the country concerned. If one or two of these are growing worse, especially if all three have, it would be strange to call the result ‘development’ even if per capita income doubled” (see Abuiyada, 2018; and Nwosu, 2013).

Cases of child abuse in Nigeria
There are several cases of child abuse in different parts of Nigeria. In Northern Nigeria, Kaduna State precisely, over 300 persons were rescued by the police from an Islamic boarding school in September 2019. Among those rescued were children most of whom were between five years of age and under the age of eighteen. The place where these people were was tagged “house of torture” as every child there had visible marks of torture on their mortal bodies. Most of them were also chained, and constantly beaten and raped by those who “teach” in the school, thereby violating their fundamental human rights (The Sun, 2019; and The Guardian, 2019).

Also in Benue State, the police arrested a young man by name Terna Taga. Taga was accused of raping and impregnating a 10-year-old girl. The girl, who happened to be an orphan, lives with one of her uncles who was planning and preparing to plunge her into child marriage by marrying her out to an old blind man. Having been put in the family way by the rapist, the little girl later delivered a baby girl at her tender age through caesarean section after three days of protracted labour (see Pulse.ng, 2019).

In Lagos State in April 2019, another case of rape against a minor surfaced. The 13-year-old victim whose name was withheld was frequently raped by a 44-year-old man, Kabiru Oke – the husband of the victim’s aunt whom she lives with, from October 2018 to January 2019. On the day the victim was first raped, she was sent by the man to fetch him some water for his bath. On returning from the errand, the man pushed her into the bathroom and raped her. Feeling uncomfortable with the act, the victim reported to her aunt but, she did nothing about it. With her (the aunt’s) levity or negligence therefore, the man continued with the heinous act of his until January 10 when the man’s 19-year-old son, Farouq caught him in the act and even joined in violating the minor. In the same January however, the girl fled the place for her mother’s house in Ogun State where she was later discovered to be pregnant (see allAfrica.com, 2019).

Further, in Aambra State, Eastern Nigeria, some women were arrested for child trafficking. The women, who pretend to be blind, lent little children from other human traffickers for 1,000 Naira per day to beg for money from road users on their behalf. People, of course, never knew the women were fake blind beggars and exploiters of young children until a taskforce team under the umbrella of Anambra Ministry of
Women Affairs, Social Welfare and Children bumped into them and arrested them. In an interaction with the children after the arrest, the Commissioner in-charge of the Ministry came to know that the children were not the biological sons and daughters of the fake blind beggars and that they don’t even know where their parents are (Legit, 2018).

Finally in Lagos, the Nigerian Police Force arrested a lady who allegedly caged a young boy who lived with them in the same cage with a dog. The 10-year-old boy who was brought to Lagos State from Anambra State in 2012 with his two siblings after they lost their parents was flogged with belt and later locked up with a dog in the kennel by a 24-year-old Onyinye Mbadike. But upon her arrest, Onyinye denied locking the boy in a cage with a dog; she said she only locked him in an empty dog kennel and not with a dog in the kennel because he took a hot drink from their refrigerator and started misbehaving. However, her act was obviously a child abuse, and was widely condemned by numerous Nigerians after the video of the incidence went viral on Facebook and other social media (Sahara Reporters, 2019).

**Effects of child abuse on personal and national development in nigeria**

The circumstances surrounding a person’s childhood have a way of affecting his personality. A child that is subjected to prostitution for example, may end up seeing it as a societal norm, a justified means of livelihood and a thing to equip the progeny or future generation with. A child who has been used to vagrant or Almajiri lifestyle would also see the society as a wild place where exhibition of wild behaviours is welcomed. In like manner, girls who have been victims of child marriage have the tendency of caring less for their own children as they themselves never tasted or experienced true care from their own parents, while those abandoned at childhood for one sickness or another tend to see themselves as undesirable, smelling, useless elements to the society.

Freedom, we know, is central to development. However, it will be ultra-difficult for a child in the hands of human traffickers to boast of development. A child who rather than being in school is sent to work as a “bus conductor” or to hawk pure water 24/7 will also find it hard to discover and harness his true potentials as an individual, for education is very vital to self-discovery.

Through education also, which child abuse denies many children, illiteracy is terminated. No wonder children facing the issue of abuse in different Nigerian communities swim in the ocean of illiteracy and ignorance.

Self-discipline that many Nigerians lack and some evil that take place in the country today have their root partly in child abuse. On 4 November 2018 for example, Nigeria lost one of its own as a result of child abuse. The deceased in particular was poisoned alongside her four grandchildren by a girl child, Taibat whom she lived with. Taibat who was the woman’s housemaid carried out the ugly act that left the woman dead and her four grandchildren hospitalized after she was starved of the family meal by the deceased. (Pulse.ng, 2018).
Very importantly, children used for sex by human traffickers are highly exposed to the risk of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). This in turn affects development greatly, as the prevalence of STDs can reduce the average life expectancy of any human society (Ebigbo, 2006 in Onyido and Vareba, 2019). Aside from these, child abuse increases the level of poverty and inequality in Nigeria. Although many people believe that poverty is one of the reasons why people engage in child abuse like sending a child to hawk during school hours, or engaging him/her in apprenticeship; many parents also believe that they secure their family survival by including their children into workforce, but that is not the way out because child abuse of any sort is tantamount to impairment of a child’s future. In fact, poverty never gets reduced by depriving a child his due, education, moral and social trainings inclusive.

Finally, child abuse is a crime-augmenting agent. Crime soars in an atmosphere of child abuse. Drug abuse, fraud, rape, robbery, shoplifting, vandalism, chronic bitterness, addiction to pornography, thuggery, burglary and so forth that we experience in our society are, directly and indirectly, products of child abuse and bad upbringing. In Northern Nigeria for example, children who are victims of child abuse are presently being utilized by Boko Haram terrorist group for suicide bombing. According to BBC News for example, two girls and a boy were used by Boko Haram to attack a video hall in Konduga village in north-eastern Borno State, which left no less than 30 people killed. This, of course, robbed the country 30 of its manpower, who had one thing or the other to contribute to the nation’s overall development.

**Conclusion**

No doubt, no country knows or experiences true development in the midst of hyper-child abuse. Children, as stated in the introductory part, signify continuity. Impairing their future by abusing their freedoms and rights is equal to impairing their development, our national development and our tomorrow’s society. Thus, it becomes a necessity that the issue of child abuse is properly dealt with at individual or family, organizational and governmental levels for development and tomorrow’s sake.

**Recommendations**

i. Basic education should be truly made free in all Nigerian states as some parents who engage their children in day hawking do so to enable them raise their school fees.

ii. Both the government and non-governmental organizations including literate minds should help in organizing free programmes where people would be enlightened or educated on the need to put female genital mutilation or circumcision of girl child and child marriage particularly to a stop. This is because many who engage in the acts lack the knowledge of the dangers that accompany them and because the coming of knowledge engenders sanity and transformation.

iii. Victims of child abuse irrespective of their ethnicity and religion should be sent to orientation centers where experts would help in their orientation, reorientation and rehabilitation. There, their minds have to be properly worked upon because of the
psychological and emotional traumas they might have gone through in life.

iv. For parents who give their children out to others probably as a result of extreme poverty should make necessary inquiries concerning the persons they are handing their children over to; they should also visit the children from time to time to be sure that they are not being ill-treated or abused.

v. The government and security personnel should apprehend any child found hawking or doing any other work during school hours, at least. This will enable them to track down the child’s parents (or guardian) after which they would be punished for mortgaging the child’s future for the attainment of their immediate needs.

vi. People should learn to expose and/or report any human trafficker, no matter their relationship with the trafficker, to appropriate authorities, for this is one of the ways that sanity would be restored in our society and because no one knows who the victim might be tomorrow.

References


Pictures of the Victims

(Photos source: Sky News, 2019)
Picture of the 10-year-old Victim of Rape

(Source: Pulse.ng, 2019)

Picture of the Fake Blind Beggars and Exploiters of Children

(Source: Legit, 2018)

Picture of Onyinye Flogging the 10-year-old Boy with Belt in Front of the Dog Kennel

Pictures of Onyinye, the Child Abuser
(Photo sources: Channelstv.com, 2019; and Legit, 2019)