

The Menace of Child Abuse in Nigeria: A Case Study of Street Hawking in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State

Nseabasi Akpan* and Abiodun J. Oluwabamide**

**Department of Sociology/Anthropology, University of Uyo, Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria*

***Department of Sociology, Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria, Kaduna State, Nigeria*

E-mail: abioduntoluwa@yahoo.com, abioduntolorun@hotmail.com

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ABSTRACT In Nigeria, children face the menace of abuse ranging from physical injuries, abandonment, sexual abuse to child labour. In fact, child abuse is becoming alarming in the country. Government's efforts to combat the problem have yielded little or no result. This study therefore, examines street hawking (a form of child labour) and its consequences on children in Uyo, a city in Nigeria. It also appraises recent intervention to the problem. The result showed that unemployment and poverty are the major causes of child hawking in the area. It recommended that punitive measures should be taken against children who engage in hawking as well as their parents.

INTRODUCTION

There is no generally accepted definition for the term 'child abuse'. But it simply refers to the ill-treatment of a child by his parents or any other adult. Edu and Edu (1999) describe child abuse as a willful maltreatment of a child. Such maltreatment according to them, can include acts of commission (abuse) and omission (neglect).

A narrow definition of child abuse is limited to life-threatening physical violence, including severe beatings, burns and strangulation which are inflicted on children by the adult members of the community. A broader definition however, lays emphasis on any treatment other than the most favourable care, and includes neglect, sexual or emotional abuse and exploitation. Whichever way, child abuse is the flagrant abuse of children's God-given and constitution-guaranteed freedom, comfort and peace, by adults in the society. In Nigeria, for example, the rights of citizens in chapters 4 section 30, 40 of the 1997 constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria guarantees every citizen's basic and fundamental human rights. Here, the constitution does not make any distinction between the rights of adults and children. Thus, children are expected to enjoy these rights. With the menace of child abuse in the country, children are being denied some of these rights. This study therefore examines street hawking in Nigeria, with a view to identifying its consequences on children. It makes particular reference to Uyo, a city in south eastern Nigeria.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the basic principles of the International Convention on the Right of the Child is that every child must be protected against all forms of exploitation, indecent or degrading treatment, including child labour, abduction and sale (UNICEF 2000). According to UNICEF, exploiting the labour of a child means employing a person below the age of 15 years and paying him/her less than the minimum standard wage.

The International Labour Organization estimates there are 246 million working children aged between five and seventeen worldwide (Anti-slavery International 2002). At least 179 million are estimated to work in the worst forms of child labour – one out of the world's five to seventeen years old. According to the ILO (2006), 111 million children under 15 are in hazardous work and should be immediately withdrawn from this work.

ILO (1996:12) states that approximately 130,000 children work in India's hand-knotted carpet industry, 80% of whom are located in Uttar Pradesh, the country's most populous state (over 140 million people) and the centre of the rug industry. ILO described the working conditions as often poor, involving long hours sitting in one position, breathing cotton and wool fibres, eye-strain from doing very fine work and poor lightening.

Shocking doesn't go half the way to describing it. Children, from toddlers to teenagers,

are sitting in the dust, in overpowering heat, working. There is no shade or shelter. Each child has a pile of rocks and is breaking them into stones with a gnarled, makeshift hammer made from a wooden stick and piece of metal stuck on the end.

Wheat (2002) expressed shock at the hard work children do in some parts of Ghana. She visited a quarry worked by children and their mothers. According to her, there, she witnessed children and adults working in some of the hardest conditions imaginable. Thus, Wheat (2002:17) observes:

It has been observed that children stand a great risk of workplace violence. ILO (2006: 31) states that in a world where workplace violence is on the rise, children are the most vulnerable. According to ILO, little hard data is available but evidence points toward an increase in the phenomenon, both in industrialized and developing countries. Thus, according to a United Nations study, while many of the world's more than 200 million child labourers experience systematic violence, some 100 million legally employed adolescents are also affected (www.violencestudy.org). The study identified the most common forms of violence against children in the workplace as physical, psychological, verbal or sexual (ILO 2006: 31).

It has been suggested that child labour should be replaced with education. Worldwide, the link between improving access to education and ending child labour are increasingly recognized (ILO 2009). ILO made reference to a circus school on the coast of Morocco, an innovative community effort among many to get children out of work and into school.

METHODOLOGY

The methods of data collection include: observation, in-depth interview and visit to the homes of some children who engage in street hawking. A total of 175 respondents were selected using the simple random sampling technique in the proportion of 25 from each of the 7 areas considered to constitute great risk to juvenile hawkers. They include Uyo's main motor park, the mechanic village, the University of Uyo area, Oron Road, Ikot Ekpene Road, Wellington Bassey Road and Aka Road. In these areas, juvenile hawkers face the risk of either being knocked down by vehicles or in some cases, female

hawkers may be lured into sexual intercourse by adults.

THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL SETTING OF UYO

Uyo is the capital of Akwa Ibom State (one of the thirty-six states in Nigeria). The government of the state operates from this city. Thus, all the State Government's offices are located in the city. There are more than twenty banks in Uyo. Migration to the city is high. This is because a large number of people are moving from the rural areas of the state to Uyo for greener pastures and better living conditions.

The University of Uyo, a Federal Government-owned institution is located in the city. There are many primary and secondary schools in the city as well. There are two government-owned hospitals in the city – the University of Uyo Teaching Hospital and St. Luke's Hospital Anua. There are also many privately-owned clinics.

The major commercial means of transportation in Uyo are motorcycles. But recently, the state government has assisted a number of individuals in owning cars which now serve as public means of transportation within the city. But they are very few. A large number of people own cars. There are large numbers of traders in the city. There is one large modern market in the city centre.

Apart from the indigenes who are Ibibio, there are people from other parts of Nigeria residing in Uyo. The main language spoken in the city is the Ibibio language. English language is used for official purposes and sometimes for discussions between two people whose languages are different, for example, between an Ibibio speaker and Ibo speaker.

RESULTS

Like other Nigerian cities, street hawking especially by children is common in Uyo. Articles soled by these hawkers include biscuits, bananas, fried and boiled groundnut, boiled meats, pounded cassava (known as *fufu*), yams, beans, garden eggs, oranges, plantains, farina (known as *garri*), etc. In Uyo, street hawking is not restricted to one particular sex. That is, both boys and girls engage in it. The age of these juvenile hawkers ranges between twelve and seventeen years.

Street hawking in Uyo is attributed to unemployment and poverty. This can be traced to the poor economy of the nation which is affected by inflationary factors amongst others. Another factor responsible for street hawking by children is loss of parents, a situation which forces a child to fend for himself/herself.

A juvenile hawker said that he was hawking so as to help his parents to make ends meet. According to him, his father was a security man in a Government office complex in Uyo and the mother a farmer and petty trader. As a result of his parent's occupations, which yielded meager income, they are unable to cater for the entire family, i.e. they are unable to provide enough food, clothing and good accommodation for the family. Therefore, for the family to be able to feed till the end of each month, when a meager salary would be paid, he and his brothers and sisters have to hawk different kinds of fruits such as oranges, mangoes, bananas, etc. depending on the season.

DISCUSSION

The consequences of street hawking in Uyo are many. Observations during the fieldwork and from the data collected have shown a number of consequences of street hawking on children. These are as follows:

Most of the hawkers have permanently lost the chances of becoming literate. They engage in hawking on the streets from morning till evening and as a result of this, they do not have the time to enroll in schools. Most of them have attended schools but dropped out as a result of their inability to pay the required fees. By and large, they do not have basic education, they are only able to count money and speak some Pidgin English during transactions.

Children who hawk on the streets of Uyo are always exposed to extreme weather conditions. They hawk their goods in the sun, in excessive heat. They also hawk during the rainy season which takes longer time in the area and as a result, they are exposed to certain ill-health problems such as pneumonia. They also undergo physical stress which is also inimical to health.

Juvenile hawkers in Uyo face the risk of road accidents. Accidents involving street hawkers especially children, occur almost on a daily basis on the streets of Uyo. Usually victims lose their wares/goods and at times, they sustain serious

injuries, some get deformed or paralyzed and some end up dying. These accidents happened mainly when the hawkers attempted to cross major roads.

Children that hawk around the motor parks have a high tendency of imitating the negative attitudes of touts. Generally, motor park touts, motorcycle men and commercial vehicle operators are very abusive and aggressive. They also engage in immoral acts such as touching the breasts of female hawkers or other female passers-bys. Male children who sell or hawk around such areas also adopt such aspects of their lifestyles.

Female children that hawk on the streets of Uyo sometimes move to certain areas where they anticipate more customers. In some cases, they are unfortunate to meet certain bad gang of boys or men who would entice them with money or other gifts and rape them. Some of these girls are seriously prone to sexual abuse. However, the rape cases (i.e. children sexual abuse cases) are rarely reported.

Some of the sexually abused juveniles may end up contacting sexually transmitted diseases. In an interview with a patent medicine store owner, he said that children especially, those that engaged in hawking, often come to take injections for the cure of certain sexually transmitted disease. There is therefore, the tendency for some of them to be infected with HIV/AIDS.

Another very serious consequence of street hawking is unwanted pregnancies. Some of the female juvenile hawkers who come around the motor parks have befriended some bad characters and they have made them semi-prostitutes. They engage in indiscriminate sex as a result of which they sometimes become pregnant.

A number of female juvenile hawkers that became pregnant took to abortion. It is no gain saying that socially and ethically, abortion is considered an evil act by the society. These girls risk premature death when they engage in abortion. Usually, they found it difficult to identify who actually impregnated them. Even when they identified such persons, these persons deny getting the girl pregnant.

At this juncture, we shall discuss the recent intervention by the government. During the second half of the year 2008, the newly elected Governor of Akwa Ibom State took particular interest in the problem of child labour. He lamented the situation whereby many children are subjected to various forms of child abuse. He

decried child labour, especially street hawking and the situation where children are thrown out and allowed to suffer because they have been accused of witchcraft (Thisday 2009). Oftentimes, children suspected to be witches were beaten and tortured and left to fend for themselves.

Very recently, the government has, through legislation, banned all forms of child labour and torture. The law stipulates some jail terms for anyone who engaged children in any form of child labour. Similarly, anyone who accused a child of witchcraft is liable to jail sentence. The government has also introduced free education for children at both the primary and secondary school levels. It believes that with this, children who have been engaging in street hawking due to lack of money to pay school fees can now attend schools.

Data show that members of the public are still silent on the government actions. Most respondents/interviewees refused to comment on the government's action. They said that it was too early to assess the people's reactions since many of them are still studying the law. But considering the depth of the belief in witchcraft in the area, there is the likelihood that the ban on people from accusing children of witchcraft would receive some negative reactions. This is because the belief in witchcraft is entrenched in the people's world view. Furthermore, public enlightenment on the law is inadequate hence, a large number of people especially those in the rural areas are not yet aware of the ban and the law backing it. It is hoped that the government would conduct massive enlightenment campaign on the issue.

CONCLUSION

Street hawking is a negation of the international convention on the rights of the child. It is indeed inhuman for anyone to engage a child in money-making venture. Such a child is denied basic education which is another right of every child. Apart from those consequences of child labour we have discussed, there is still the problem of wear and tear. Children who engaged in work may wear away before they actually reach the age in which they are expected to work. Some sustained life-long injuries which would hinder them from contributing meaningfully to development when they are expected to. Nigeria should therefore, practically demonstrate her commitment

to the global fight against child abuse in all its ramifications.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following are our recommendations:

Children that hawk on the streets should be arrested so that their parents could be traced and disciplined appropriately. With this, the society can discourage street hawking by children. Furthermore, government should enlighten the people on the negative effects of street hawking by children. The enlightenment should be aimed at discouraging people from buying from juvenile hawkers. In addition, the government should make more moves toward achieving and/or realizing the aims of her UBE (Universal Basic Education) programme. This will encourage more parents to send their children to school, thereby, discouraging street hawking. Also, government should provide more employment opportunities so that parents who engaged their children in hawking will have reliable sources of income. With this, they would no longer depend on proceeds from their children's labour.

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