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Urban Space Hawking: Perils of Female Child Abuse and Social Implications in a Developing City

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Abstract

Sequel to the spiraling inflation in Nigeria, child labour has increased tremendously. In most Nigerian urban centres, children could be seen hawking menacingly. This study examines the hazards of hawking (a form of child abuse) on the female children. Two hundred and forty-seven female hawkers are interviewed. Analysis of the structured interview reveals that large family size, economic crunch, orphanage and single parentage are the constraints that lead to hawking. Problems associated with hawking are identified as obscenity, rape, accidents, early pregnancy and street fights. Social implications identified include stress, moral laxity, sexually transmitted diseases, and criminality. All these pangs on the female children population are perilous to the dignity of womanhood. The family support programme (FSP) should consider child abuse an issue of primary focus.

Introduction

It is universally acknowledged that a child is a joy to the family. There is hardly any culture in which children do not occupy a special position. The importance of children in African tradition is not equaled by wealth. A family unit without children may well be said to be moribund. It is therefore an ironic cultural contradiction that despite the preeminence of the child, the status of the female child is a cause for grave concern in most cultures.

Before the advent of colonial "adventurers" in Nigeria, our pre-colonial society was closely knit. Every member of the community was his brother's keeper. In that experience, there was good neighbourliness and the task of caring and properly bringing up a child was not only that of the parents, but of the whole community. Consequently, a parent could not maltreat or

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neglect a child without retribution from the immediate community. The kind of abuses children are exposed to these days were rare. It is a matter of regret that the erstwhile sense of communality of the African was one of the casualties of western "civilization". It is a dud legacy for the African heritage.

Today, Nigeria stands in a world of turbulent social transformation, characterized by menacing materialism. The situation became exacerbated following the global economic recession and the dwindling crude oil fortunes of Nigeria in the 1980s. The Nigerian nation was ill-prepared for the social upheavals. Consequently, the nation confronted a range of social problems: retrenchment of workers, unemployment, poverty and poor conditions of service. The degradation challenged the Nigerian family tremendously. Alternative approaches were sought to stem the pangs. The exploitation of minors came into focus when child labour started.

The Nigerian constitution insists that all the citizens, children inclusive, have the right to the dignity of the human person; that no person shall be subjected to any form of forced or degrading labour (FGN, 1992). This investigation is a survey to provide information on female child hawking. Child hawking is an aspect of child abuse that has assumed a frightening proportion in Nigeria today. In the urban and semi-urban cities, these itinerant marketers could be seen on every street with their wares.

In a shattering revelation, Osunfisan (1998) reports that globally, a staggering 250 million children mostly in developing countries engage in child labour. In Africa, he estimates that 24 million children are economically active with millions of them in Nigeria. "Child labour" covers children under the age of 15 years engaged in work or employment with the aim of earning a livelihood for themselves and/or their families, a definition adopted by the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) and International Labour Organization (ILO), (Osofisan, 1998).

In the view of Dorough (1986), underdevelopment in Nigeria has made the provision of social welfare services like education, healthcare, water supply and energy not only inadequate, but expensive, thereby prompting parents to resort to child labour and exploitation. Oloke (1989) remarks that street hawking is encouraged because it is convenient for those who purchase their needs while in the traffic or in the motor park. This means that so long as there are patronizers, there will be hawkers. The purpose of this study is to find out the factors responsible for hawking, problems associated with hawking and social implications of hawking.

Research Design

Primary research is considered necessary because adequate data for the present study are not available. A cross-sectional survey design is chosen.

The primary purpose is to capture aspects of the female hawker's trade-off experience from the primary source.

Choice of Research Setting

The actual research setting is as it were "in-situ". The subjects are active participants in hawking and the researchers "faked" patronage to boost their confidence and cooperation thus making interactions more generally cordial and the subjects receptive. Expertise is put in to carefully effect and sustain empathy, which according to Glassier and Starves (1974) is a disarming feedback mechanism.

Population and Sampling

Female hawkers in Uyo capital city constitute the population of the study. The hawkers operate in pairs and clusters. In the circumstance, to avoid suspicion, each child hawker found willing to cooperate is interviewed. There are 247 subjects with calculated average age of 12.5 years.

Research Instrument and Data Collection Procedure

Data are obtained from the primary source (female child hawkers), using a structured interview, designed by the researchers. The questions (25 items) cover demographics: age, parentage, factors and perils associated with teenage female child hawkers (economic hardship, orphanage, pregnancy, accidents). The responses are recorded in audio-sensitive mini voice recorder. There is no information to betray the identity of the respondents.

On the social implications of hawking, views from some "opinion leaders" — guidance counsellors, clergy, school principals, social workers and psychologists — are obtained and collated.

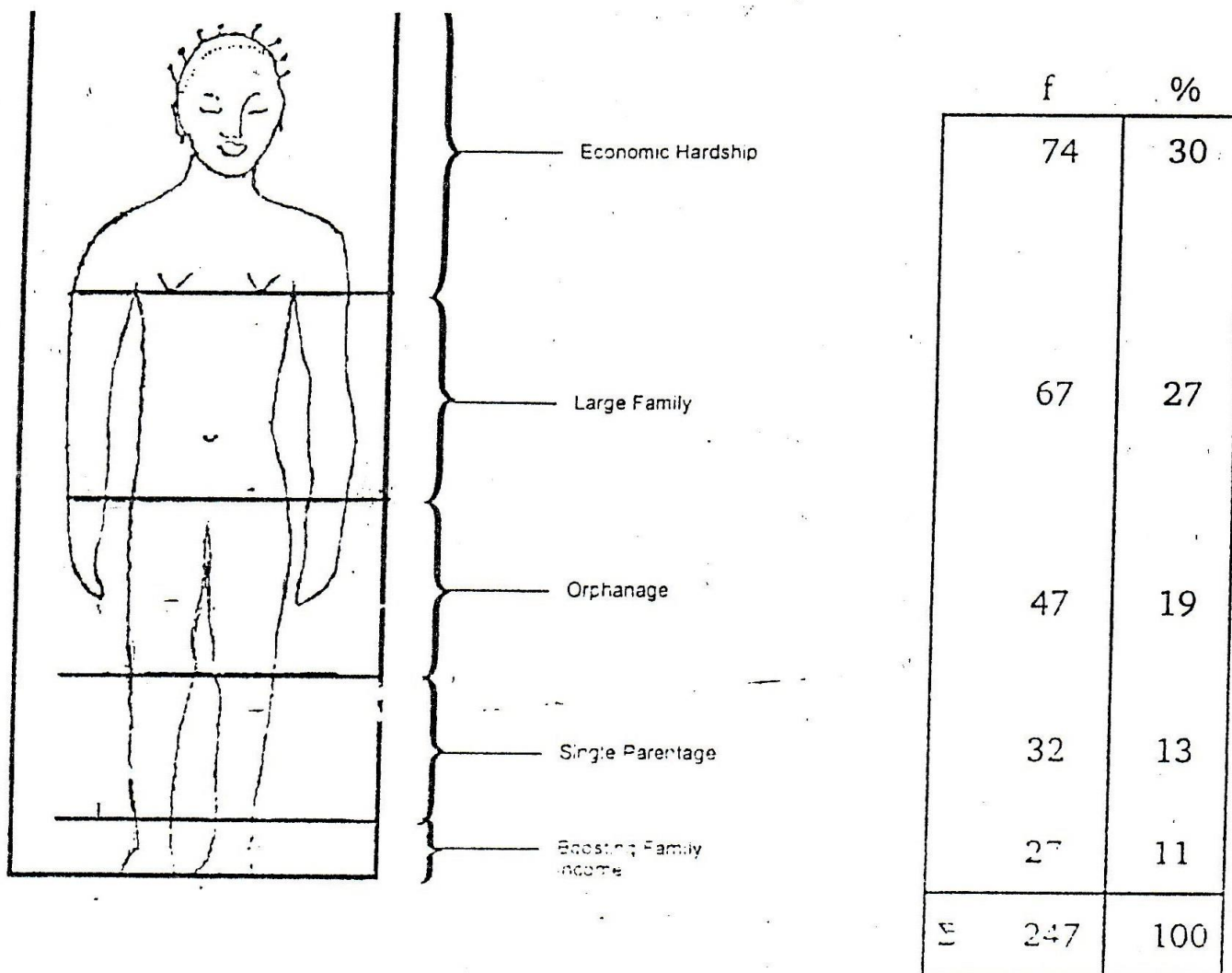
Results

Three broad areas are examined. First, the factors responsible for hawking. Second, the problems associated with hawking. Third, the social implications of hawking. The three-dimensions are evaluated descriptively and presented graphically.

Factors Responsible for Hawking

The results show that five factors are responsible for female child hawking. In ascending order, they are: to boost family income (11%), single parenthood (13%), orphanage (19%), large family size (27%) and economic hardship (30%) (Fig. 1).

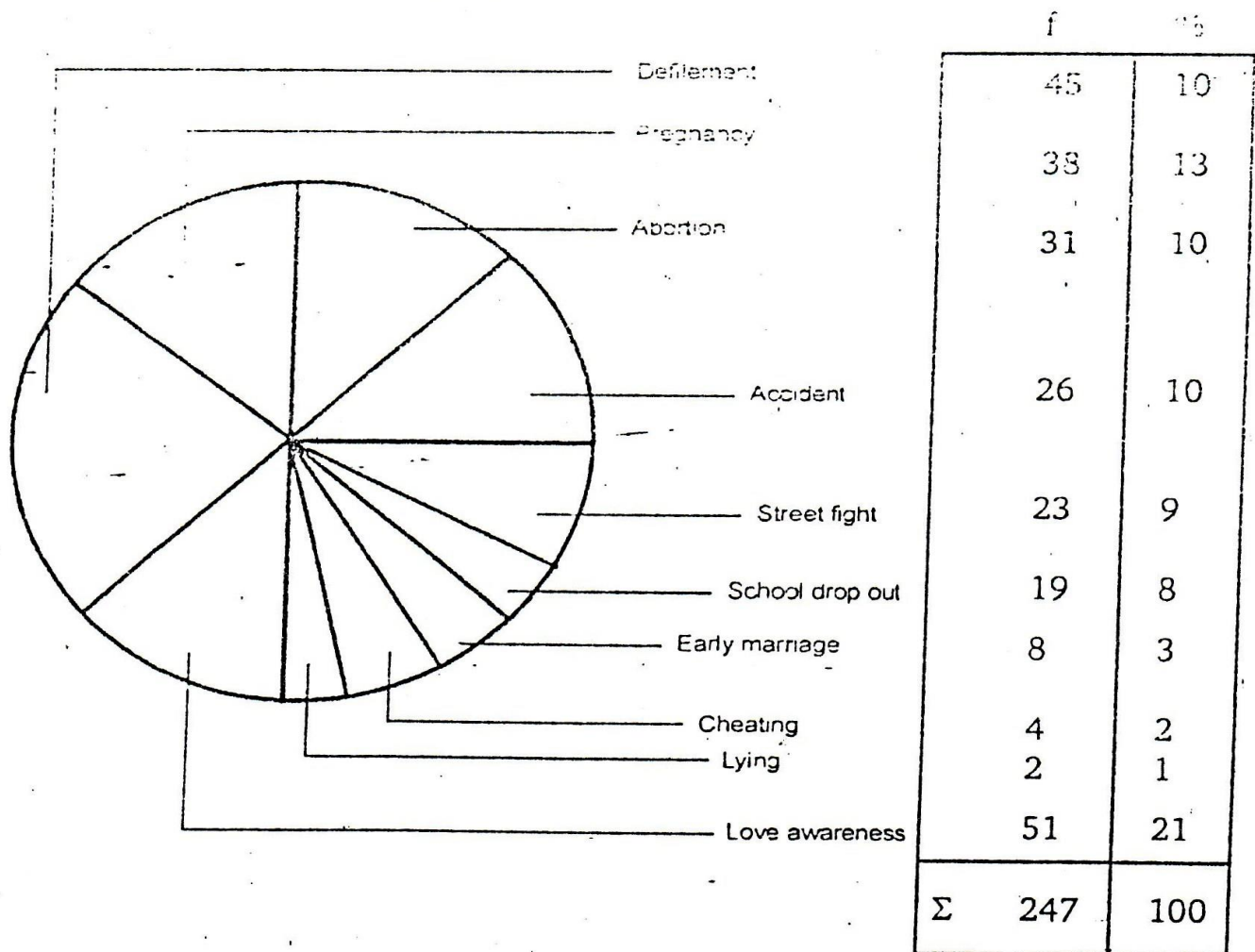
Fig. 1: Factors responsible for hawking



Problems of Hawking

The top ten problems associated with hawking are presented in Fig. 2. The most recurring "occupational" hazards are: love advances (21%), defilement (18%), pregnancy (15%), abortion (13%) and accidents (10%). Other vices identified are lying (1%), cheating (2%), early marriage (3%), school drop out (8%) and street fight (9%).

Fig. 2: Pie chart showing top-ten problems of hawking



Social Implications of Hawking

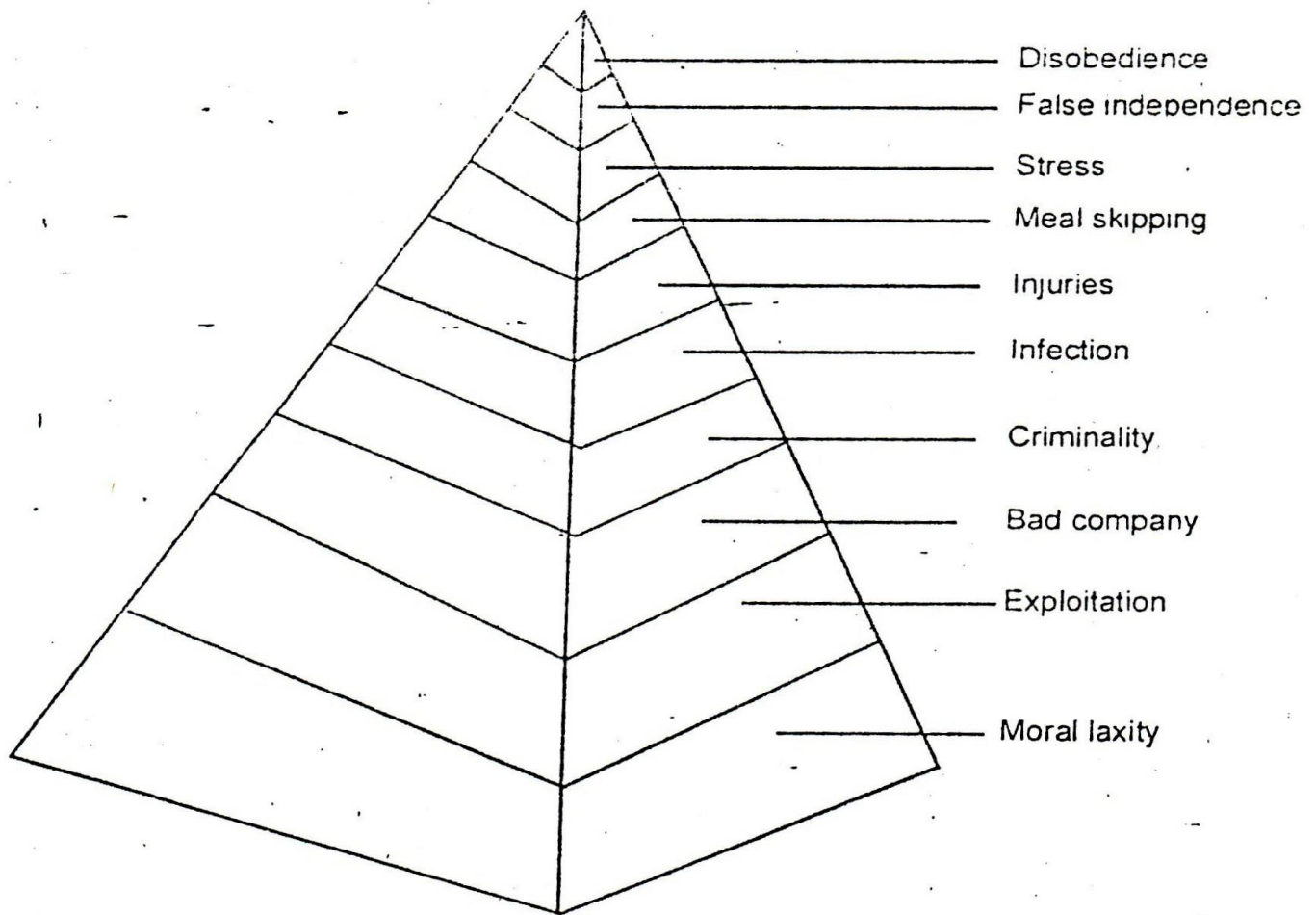
A significant issue raised is the social implications of female child hawking. This is reduced into a pyramidal structure with the base occupying the most lethal social implications while the apex shows the least reported events (Fig. 3).

Discussion

What does this study tell us about the female child hawkers? It is not easy to give a simple answer, but the truth is that the picture is negative. This research provides a situational report of the perils experienced by the female child hawkers. Bluntly stated, it indicts the conscience of the adult society.

This study shows that whatever the reasons for hawking, home background provides the strongest baseline impact. Economic downturn has devastated the budget of most Nigerian families. Yakubu (1998) describes

Fig. 3: Pyramid of social implications of hawking



the situation as an undercurrent that is ruining child education and health. Regardless of the marginal economic gains of child hawking, the long-term effect overwhelms the “psychic alchemy” of the developing female child. Her self-esteem is muffled by frustrating escapades such as rape, pregnancy, abortion, accident, cheating and street fights. This is a tragedy of massive proportions. The adult population should acknowledge children, as an “endangered species”, from the barrage of social indignities.

As a result of economic austerity, many Nigerian parents and guardians abuse their children. One example is the female child street-trading to support the family income. Child labour is a double-edged sword. While the stipendiary income provides for subsistence, the emotional, social, mental and physical trauma unleashed on the child may be irreversible. Yakasia (1988) states that abused children tend to show behavioural problems, low self-esteem, withdrawal syndrome, oppositional behaviour and learning difficulties. These are traits which could impact negatively on

the adult life (personality) of the child. The contributions of child labour to the Nigerian economy (if any) may be likened to an over-drawn cheque merely "good" in appearance but very deceitful in currency valid essence. More than 12 million children under the age of 13 engage in child labour in Africa (Senlong, 1990), constituting about half of the total population of the continent. If these minors are denied reasonable educational opportunities, why should Africa not remain a "dark continent"?

Educational Implications

It is found that the average age of the female teenage hawkers is 12.5 years. Based on the Nigerian educational system, 12-year old children should be in the first tier of the secondary school programme. Our investigation shows that the female street hawkers are of two distinct groups: the primary school and junior secondary school drop outs, while some combine schooling with street hawking.

In African cultural context, it is a popular misconception that female education is a glorified waste of resources. It is assumed that an educated female child brings marginal economic benefit to her parents' family because after marriage she has to transfer the dividends of her educational investment to the husband's family. It is no wonder that most of the petty street traders are young girls. Donli (1990) avers that illiteracy and school drop-outs are the products of child abuse and neglect. The bias against female education in Nigerian persists.

Women are "home makers". Naturally they are better in child rearing and upbringing. To delegate such important social responsibilities to the uneducated segments of the society is a national dis-service. There is a familiar saying which cautions that "if one gives a child to a slave to educate, he will grow up with the orientation of a slave". Similarly, the slogan "to educate the woman is to educate the family" is still a positive cliché.

An abused and exploited female child does not experience childhood in a positive sense. She does not have adequate time for her education and studies. Yakasai (1988) deposes that deprived children suffer from intellectual and cognitive underdevelopment. This reversal of role robs the female child of a promising future. It is from this premise that we advocate that the Family Support Programme should evolve a "Nigeria Initiative for Female Education". The vision should be to campaign, sensitize, initiate and monitor the development of female education.

In a country like Nigeria where tradition has firm root and is respected, female child labour may not be phased out too soon. This implies that many female children may not escape the claws of educational deprivation having been incorporated into the "labour force" prematurely. Another vista of

hope should be open for them. That alternative is adult education. To that extent, accessible and affordable adult literacy programmes should be put in place. The students in adult education schools should be given book rebate and free tuition as part of their incentives. The successful candidates from the schools should be given special considerations for employment.

As an aspect of educational implication, parents should be educated adequately about the consequences of street hawking on their children. Very often, some parents may not be aware of such consequences as highlighted in Figs. 2 and 3.

Health education can go a long way also in helping parents understand the psychological and emotional problems involved in hawking. With this type of education, parents may acquire knowledge which may in turn change their attitude for a better future.

Conclusion

The abuse of minors is an albatross on the conscience of humanity. It has passed the stage of sympathetic concern. The rights of human dignity are inalienable. They redefine humanhood, minor or adult. The dignity of the child is a primary right. Children are the scions of the adult generation. Adults owe the children a natural responsibility to nurture them to useful and productive adulthood. Indeed a civilization should be judged "civilized" by the way it treats its "weakest link" — the female children.

In Nigeria, the constitutional provision (FGN, 1992) that the state shall direct its policy towards ensuring that children and young persons are protected against any exploitation whatsoever, could be imagined as the proverbial bull-dog, omnipotent in theory but impotent in practice. A "fairer-deal" should be assured for the children, as abuses, exploitation and neglect are still raging with unabated fury.

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