

CHILD ABUSE AND NEGLECT



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Chapter 3

CHILD ABUSE IN NIGERIA: THE JOURNEY SO FAR

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INTRODUCTION

In recent times, concern about the child has taken the centre stage in national and international discourse. It all started being of national and international concern in 1948 when the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was made, which then became specified and particularized in 1989 at the General Assembly of the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child. In 1990, the World Summit for children was held at the United Nations (UN) headquarters, New York, where 7 Heads of State and Governments, including Nigeria, attended. Infact it was at this summit that Nigeria signed the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Here also, Heads of State and governments pledged their commitment to putting a programme of action in place towards proper child development. In 1990 also, at Addis Ababa, Nigeria along with several other African countries adopted a Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the African Child at the Convention of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU). This Charter was derived from the Universal Declaration of 1989 but recognised the peculiarities of the African Child. The Charter recognized among others the socio-cultural and the educational dimensions of the African child which may not differ much among African Countries but which could be quite incomparable when other continents are brought into focus. In 1991 therefore, at another convention of the same body in Abuja - Nigeria, the 1990s was declared "Decade of the African Child" with the 16th of June every year set aside to mark the "Day of the African Child".

Since then, different summits have been held in different parts of the world with the child at the centre stage. Different focal points have also been addressed. In Jomtien-Thailand, at the World Conference in

1990, education was addressed. In 2000, in Dakar, girl's education took the centre stage. In May 2002 at the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children, Heads of State and Governments addressed gender disparity in the provision of education. With all these activities, one would have thought that Child Abuse (CA) would not be an issue anymore in the world. Unfortunately, Child Abuse (CA) is so pervasive that special attention has been attracted to the issue. Organisations such as the International Society for the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) and the African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) have been formed. Several conferences and workshops have been organised on the issue. Some of these include the ANPPCAN Conference of November 1996 held in Kaduna and another of March 2004 held in Enugu. Both had CA and Neglect as their central theme.

In several government ministries, the child development departments have been constituted all in a bid to address child issues yet child abuse is a problem. With all these efforts, one is bound to ask, what really is the problem? Is it that CA is not really understood or are there sustaining factors which have not been addressed? What are the implications of CA to the child and the society? Can we afford to abandon the fight since it is so resistant to efforts so far put in place? Who are the perpetrators of the act? What are further ways of combating the pandemic? Attempts at answering these questions would form the focus of our discourse in this chapter.

WHAT IS CHILD ABUSE (CA)

Child Abuse would not be understood unless we understand who a child is. A child according to Obinaju (1995) is defined by the law of the land and the general practice of the people. She posited that in Nigeria, a child is a human being below the age of 18. An abuse refers to making a wrong and excessive use of something. In addition, an abuse could be looked at as a cruel and an unsympathetic treatment of a person. Hornby (2002) included as abuses, making of rude and offensive remarks about a person. Child Abuse therefore refers to any act which would amount to making a wrong and an excessive use of the child, an act which excludes sympathy and humaneness from the

treatment which the child receives and an act which would amount to an insult on the child.

Sule (1998) defined Child Abuse as any kind of inhuman act that jeopardizes the physical, psychological and the futurity of the child either intentionally or unintentionally. Smart (2001) conceived CA as any act of commission or omission which prevents a child from developing and functioning normally. He added that when a child is not treated the way he should or treated the way he should not, this constitutes child abuse. In all these definitions, making wrong and an improper use of the child stands out. Moreover, the effect of the improper use is alluded to as it will affect the child's development negatively.

FORMS OF CHILD ABUSE

From the definition of child abuse just undertaken, the following types can be identified:

- * rape
- * seduction
- * incest
- * slavery
- * abduction
- * labour
- * abusive communication through mass media e.g. television, magazines, etc.
- * child marriage
- * battering
- * abandonment
- * neglect
- * deprivation
- * infanticide
- * illegal fostering
- * child imprisonment
- * malnourishment
- * trafficking
- * illegal assistance to children
- * improper education

- * scarification
- * female genital mutilation
- * traditional and other initiations
- * child soldierism
- * drug addiction

Obinaju (2001) listed the forms of child abuse under child labour as follows:

1. Children hawking wares
2. Children carrying blocks for bricklayers at building sites
3. Children baby-sitting other babies either for their mothers or mistresses.
4. Children serving as house helps in homes
5. Children working on plantations
6. Children serving as guides to beggars
7. Children compulsorily made to beg
8. Children rearing goats, cattle and sheep.
9. Children engaged in commercial sex activities
10. Children serving as motor conductors
11. All neglected children.

This leads us to appreciate that each of the forms listed above can be sub-divided into several other forms of child abuse. Infact the list is endless and the forms are inter-connected depending on the circumstances and occurrences.

CAUSES AND SUSTAINING FACTORS OF CHILD ABUSE

Looking at the several forms of CA, it is clear that there are as many causes as there are the forms. In the case of rape, one could consider that for an adult to rape a child, the act hinges on an irrepresive and excessive sexual urge on the part of the adult as well as immaturity on his part. This act could also come as a result of mental disorders on the part of the assailant. Where rape occurs as a result of child marriage then the traceable determinant could be the traditional practices of the place in question. This is a clear indication to the fact that to every aspect of CA, there are multiple causes.

Gandu (1998) identified poverty occasioned by the economic policies of the country as the base of CA. Among causes identified by

him are the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) of the 80s and several other such policies. Also at the base, he identified inflation which incapacitates parents in their efforts to provide the basic needs of their children. Child neglect and lack of provision of basic amenities even for educational purposes are all traceable to this singular factor - inflation of goods which may not only be in the education circles. In a separate development, Obinaju (2004a) found poverty to gradually become a childhood phenomenon with its devastating effects on the growing mind of the child. Poverty as a phenomenon and poverty as a state have been found to be associated with poor health, low level of education, disruptive behaviour and under development (Anyanwu 1997 and Bello 1999). These variables when applicable to children are all indices of CA.

As far as acquisition of indecent materials and unsupervised communication are concerned, Obinaju (2004c) blamed this on globalisation and child neglect from parents. Even in child neglect on the part of parents, traces could be linked to poverty and efforts to breakeven in economic provisions for the family.

Other causes of CA include cultural practices which make an individual feel abnormal and estranged if he does not partake in the practice of his people. Such cultural practices perpetrate CA practices like scarification, female genital mutilation, and initiations into traditional cults.

These practices are carried out by parents/guardians as ways of making the child belong. In some cases, the child voluntarily submits himself to be abused in these ways.

Generation gap and the power differential existing between the child and the adult normally places the child at a helpless situation when acts amounting to CA are proposed. He, in the African child rearing practice, is expected to be seen and not heard. He is expected to obey and when these proposals are made, he (the child) only submits himself to be abused.

Migration and urbanization displace people from their erstwhile locations and occupations. These people are forced to engage themselves in new ventures to make a living. Hawking of wares as an example evolves in this process. Those who hawk these wares are normally

children between the ages of 5 and 12 years. Migration too permits men and women to leave their spouses in search of "greener pastures". Sailors and traders are typical examples. These would invariably find means of satisfying their sexual desires. Those who fall prey to their enticing offers are normally persons within the child age bracket.

Ignorance cannot be ruled out of the question of CA. Many parents/guardians abuse their children/wards without being aware that their actions constitute abuses. Children also submit themselves to be abused without the knowledge that their actions are also contributing to their abuse. Even when they know that their actions are not recommended by some societal arms which disseminate information on these aspects, their ignorance of the effect of their action on the child may not make them willing to desist from the act. This leads us to the weak legal service which is prevalent in Nigeria. So far, the Child Rights Act (2003) has been passed by the National House of Assembly, accented to by the President and Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces of Nigeria. Responsibilities of parents, government and children are clearly specified and all the rules and penalties for child abuse specified. Yet cases of child abuse abound even in public places without any intervention. In fact CA can be traced to almost all segments of our communities and to almost all human practices.

CONSEQUENCES OF CHILD ABUSE

They include:

- * Death
- * Recurrence of abuses
- * Trauma
- * Health complications
- * Complications during child birth for under-age girls
- * Stunted growth
- * Dropping out of school
- * Lost opportunities in life
- * Physical injuries and illness or diseases
- * Poor performance in school
- * Poor social relationships
- * Psychological or behavioural disorders

- * Deviant behaviour
- * Low self esteem
- * Criminality as abused become abusers.

PARENTING PRACTICES AND CHILD ABUSE

The child rights act (Sections 8 and 20) and the laws of Akwa Ibom State and indeed other states in Nigeria accord parents the responsibility to discipline the child. Traditionally also, parents see it as a duty to discipline their children. In some cases this responsibility is delegated to uncles, aunts, senior brothers and sisters and others whom the child may be residing with. Within the ambits of discipline, parents and the others, to whom the responsibility of disciplining the child has been delegated, overstretch their responsibility such that their action turns to CA. In some cases, children can be so battered that permanent marks are left on their skin as a result. Some parents get to the extent of heating hot iron to leave these marks "so that the child will remember to obey their instructions" on subsequent occasions. Some pour pepper on children. Many starve them of food, learning materials, clothings, leisure time and the like, all as forms of punishment. Undoubtedly, all these are forms of CA.

In another consideration, parents and guardians engage children in their business premises till late at night. Some children actually work as late as 11.00 p.m. or midnight while others wake up as early as 4.00 a.m. all in a bid to contribute to the daily business of their families. Some carry heavy load and trek several kilometers in order to get to market or hawk wares. All these, children do to the detriment of their health and formal education.

Parents sometimes conceive that making children work excessively is a method of preparing them for adulthood. Therefore, children are saddled with house chores, farm work and baby sitting to mention but a few. All these are undoubtedly forms of child abuse.

THE CHILD IN SELF ABUSE

It is often believed erroneously by children that there is freedom outside the home. This is especially so if parents are strict in their method of discipline. At the slightest provocation therefore, the child

runs out of the house and attempts to live on his own on the streets. The exigencies of life soon catch up with him - need for food, drugs, accommodation, clothings, etc. These leave him with no option than to steal or engage in some employment. Should he steal and get caught, he is mercilessly beaten, detained and sometimes killed. Where he is employed, the job for which he is employed is normally too tedious for a child to engage in. It is often hazardous to his health and general well being.

In another consideration children, out of truancy and undesirable peer influence, deny themselves their right to proper education. This they do by absenteeism from school and not being serious with their education. Other pranks like embezzlement of school fees are also contributive factors. In these ways children are seen to be contributing to their very abuse.

THE GOVERNMENT AND CHILD ABUSE

It is clearly stated in the Child Rights Act (2003) that it is the responsibility of the state to take care of the child where the immediate parents fail to do so. It is also seen that the provision of basic amenities for the welfare of the child is also the responsibility of the state. These amenities are conceived in the areas of health, education, recreation and legal services to ensure the optimal growth and development of the child. Where these are lacking, one would imagine that CA would be the resultant effect.

In consideration of Nigeria, a lot of work has been done to immunize children; hospitals and schools have also been built; occasional awareness seminars have been provided for willing parents on methods of child care and prevention of child abuse. The question which arises is, are these sufficient to completely abolish child abuse in Nigeria?

Surely there are gaps which still need to be addressed if CA is to be stemmed in Nigeria. These gaps include:

- * Making the provision of health services free for children where parents would not have to buy drugs after prescription.
- * Making educating free and compulsory such that no child below age 18 stays out of school.

- * The reduction of poverty in the country which will only be made possible by proper governance.
- * So far, the Child Rights Act, has been passed in the country. In it, areas of child abuse have been adequately addressed, what remains is its proper implementation. The government should set machinery in place to immediately implement the provision of the Child Rights Act. It is only in these ways that the government of Nigeria would be seen as contributing positively to the eradication of child abuse in the country. Any delay or neglect of these responsibilities, the government would be seen as contributing to the promotion of CA in the country.

ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS

There is need to improve generally on the living conditions of families and communities by the provision of basic services such as functional free and compulsory education, health, shelter, food and security. Other measures include:

- * Raising awareness on child rights and child protection to parents, guardians, care givers, teachers and communities.
- * Creating and stepping up awareness on available services in this area.
- * Referring vulnerable groups to the agencies which provide appropriate services
- * Identifying gaps in existing services and effectively addressing them.
- * Creating and strengthening community based child protection networks.
- * Providing legal medical networks to enhance delivery of services in community health centres and courts.
- * Addressing the issue of street families and finally
- * Ensuring effective child participation in all decision making processes especially on matters affecting children, to enable them contribute actively in general child protection issues which invariably reduce CA.

CONCLUSION

There is a lot to be said and done concerning CA especially in a country where about 70% of the population live in abject poverty. Considering the grave consequences of CA on the child and society, we cannot abandon the fight. We must acknowledge the fact that there is the political will to address the issue of CA in Nigeria. It is the responsibility of everyone therefore to engage in acts which would contribute towards achieving this goal. This can be realized by awareness creation and intensification on children issues, the various forms of child abuse, services provided and what each individual and sub-sector can do towards achieving this goal. This can be realized by awareness creation and intensification on children issues, the various forms of child abuse, services provided and what each individual and sub-sector can do towards eradication of child abuse in his community. Particularly, the government is called upon to put essential services in place and ensure sincere and active implementation of the Child Rights Act of 2003. Voluntary Agencies (NGOs, CBOs and FBOs) also have vital roles to play in this regard. It is hoped that when suggestions made in this paper are systematically implemented, that CA, would be adequately addressed in Nigeria.

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