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# **CHILD HAWKING IN NIGERIA: AN INDEX OF CRISES IN THE AFRICAN FAMILY AND SOCIETY**

By

**PROF. QUEEN I. OBINAJU**

Faculty of Education,  
University of Uyo

## **Abstract**

*With the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one was expecting to witness a positive transformation in the society especially as there had been sufficient preparation for the wake of the century. Child labour, part of which child hawking is found seems to be continuous and assuming new dimensions. This phenomenon is seen as negating the rights of the child. Parents and others in the society seem to be aiding and abating the continued practice of child hawking. The implications of this practice to the African family and society are discussed in this paper. Recommendations towards checking the continued menace are proffered such that the future of the African family and society would be desirable.*

## **Introduction**

In the past century, much work had been done by United Nations bodies like UNICEF, UNESCO etc in the area of child protection, survival and development such that one was not expecting child abuse to still be an issue in the wake of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Sensitization seminars have severally been held by different non-governmental organizations (Civitas, Unique Empowerment Initiative, African Child Foundation, etc) towards minimizing if not total eradication of child abuse. Unfortunately instead of it's stopping, several new forms are rearing their heads.

Child labour in particular has been very resistant to treatment. Other forms of child labour seem not to portray how much in crisis the entire society is as hawking by children. In this paper, a comprehensive view of the phenomenon would be attempted. Specifically, answers will be sought to the following questions: what is child hawking? Are there any sustaining factors such that despite the obvious consequences child hawking has refused to decrease? What are the implications of

these to the family and the society in general? In all these discussions, the Nigerian example would be used with the assumption that the situation is not much different in many other developing countries especially in Sub-Sahara Africa.

### **Child Hawking in Nigeria**

Hawking denotes 'going from place to place offering wares for sale' (Hornby, 2001) this involves physical movement from one place to the other persuading people to buy items of trade. When this exercise involves a person of less than age 18 years. The paper regards this as child hawking.

In Nigeria, it is a common feature for children as young as 4 years old to be seen hawking wares which range from kolanuts to cucumber. When they grow older (say between 12 and 15 years), they then graduate to hawk serious food items like garri, fofo, plantain, and even cooked food. Some hawk clothes and shoes. In fact, the commodity hawked are varied and the list is the exhaustive. Younger ones hawk in locations near their homes or accompanying their mother or older siblings. But older ones from about the age of 7 years decide on their routes and engage in independent hawking.

Hawking is carried on throughout the day and for some part of the night. In some big cities like Benin, Lagos and Port Harcourt, and depending on the location, hawking goes on for the whole day and the whole night. Children therefore can be seen hawking at all times of the day. Some hawk wares without attending any form of school while some others drop their school bags only to pick up their wares. For those who attend schools, week-ends and during holidays, hawking becomes a fulltime engagement.

Many children hawk to supplement their family's income. This can be illustrated by a situation where a mother of four prepares four trays with assorted wares before she goes out for the day's engagement. These are kept for her children who may have left for school. As soon as they come back, they each identify their trays, pick them up and start the business till whatever time sales close for the day. Others are hired by masters and mistresses to hawk. These masters and mistresses hire them for monthly pay so that those children hawk wares which sometimes are part of the master's/mistress' business. At some other times, wares hawked by these children constitute a new line of business opened by the master/mistress. Yet other hawk wares for themselves as their private business, these are mainly those who had completed their primary education or can no longer continue owing to lack of parental support. In this type of case, the line of business is normally started for them by a close relative

providing capital with the belief that he is setting the child off for life. Hawking in whatever form, location and for whatever reason constitutes child abuse.

In Nigeria, child hawking is more prevalent with the city dwellers than the rural dwellers. The reason is not far fetched. City/urban life is relatively more expensive. A city dweller needs money to settle high rental fees, pay transport fares, buy food and pay high school fees for children. To cope with these expensive modes of living, a city dweller is prone to indulge in too many unorthodox practices. These sometimes include sending their children to hawk wares in order that they make enough money to cope with the already enumerated expenses. But must this continue? Or put otherwise, is this a healthy thing for the development of the child, the family and the society?

### **Child Hawking and the Rights of the Child**

From the definition of child hawking and from the forgone discussion, it is clear that child hawking violates several clauses in the fundamental rights of the child. Child hawking is directly in opposition to the following rights of the child;

- 1) Right to survival and optimal development.
- 2) Right to protection from any act that interferes with his or her freedom and reputation.
- 3) Right to rest and recreation (leisure and play).
- 4) Right to education.
- 5) Right to good health, protection and illness and proper medical attention.
- 6) Right to protection from indecent and inhuman treatment through sexual exploitation, drug abuse, child labour, maltreatment and neglect.

Children who are seen hawking wares normally carry very heavy loads. In addition, they trek several kilometers daily in a bid to sell their wares. This obviously is not conducive to survival and optimal development of the child. This is probably a contributory factor to under weight and stunted children as reported by Obinaju (2002). In a study conducted by Essien (2001), children hawkers reported that they did not like the business as this was seen to be degrading to their personality. 72% of the respondents reported that they hawked for their masters/mistresses while 20% hawked for their personal benefits. The fact that they do not voluntarily hawk and that they do not like the exercise invariably means that hawking interferes with their freedom and reputation. Of course, movement from place to place, addressing people incessantly does not provide any rest, recreation and opportunity for leisure and play for these children. These children often contract several diseases. They are severally

and often beaten by both rain and sun, all these reduce their immunity to diseases. In this way, their right to optimal health and protection from illnesses is hardly accorded them. Normally, these children hardly have time to attend to their school work especially those ones which come in the form of take home assignments. Obinaju (2001) observes that hawking, as part of child labour promotes mediocrity as it is an antecedent to absenteeism, lack of seriousness in school work and finally poor performance. Although data on child protection is difficult to come by in Nigeria, from several reports (Ebigbo 1989 & 2003) and covert observations, children hawkers are severally exposed to pornography, drug abuse in the form of smoking cigarette and other dangerous substances. Many, especially girls below the age of 10 have been raped or assaulted sexually in different ways. These are not healthy experiences which children should grow through. In recognition of this fact and in reaction to the continuous prevalence of child abuse, the Nigerian government has enacted an act which provides for the respect of the rights of the child (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004). In Section 31, sub-section 2c of this act; it is specifically stated “a child shall not be used for hawking of goods or services on main city streets, brothels and highways”. Punishment stipulated for offenders is 10 years imprisonment.

### **Implications of Child Hawking to African Families and Society**

As children of today constitute tomorrow's society, it is pertinent to be conscious of the fact that the experiences acquired by children today determines to a great extent the nature of the society of tomorrow. Obinaju (2001) lists the effects of child labour and by extension child hawking on the family as follows:

- 1) It promotes mediocrity and half baked expertise.
- 2) It promotes lack of respect between children and adults.
- 3) It entrenches unhealthy rivalry among family members.
- 4) It encourages recklessness of members of the family. Parents no longer feel very responsible for their children's needs; and children on their own part acquire premature independence.
- 5) It promotes lack of co-operation and common course among members of the same family.
- 6) It breeds quarrels and hatred among members.
- 7) It encourages truancy and juvenile delinquency.
- 8) It works against the health of family members as in a probable case of a raped girl-hawker acquiring HIV/AIDS or a child hawker involved in an accident.

The above are surely indices of family in crisis. If these are resultant effects of child hawking on the family, it can be deduced that in every country where child hawking exists, the above effects would certainly follow. As hawking is predominant in many African societies; Nigeria, Togo, Ghana, Egypt, Sierra Leone, Gambia etc, it means that there is a high probability of having these same list as a resultant effects. These obviously are indicators of the African family in crisis.

Specific effects of the above on the society are not far fetched. A child who learns lack of cooperation and non-conforming ways of reaction from home cannot but offer this to the society of his time. His attitude of lack of respect for elders (which used to be an indispensable value in the African traditional society) is a cause for worry. Quarrels, financial recklessness, truancy, health hazards and rivalry are not healthy ingredients to the development of the African society. On the whole, there is compromise in standards of achievements. Low aspiration levels, unorthodox self sustaining strategies (like armed robbery and prostitution) and mediocrity have characterized the present day society as our children's attention have been divided between full time education and hawking. Taking these into consideration, the entire African society and not only the family is in crisis. One would dare to ask, if child hawking yields such disastrous tendencies on the African family and society, are there no remedies? Remedies would certainly be attempted only after identifying the sustaining factors.

### **Sustaining Factors to Child Hawking**

As observed above, a law has been passed to protect the child from abuse and to accord him all his human rights. Among the provisions, child hawking is addressed and penalties stipulated. But what seems to be lacking is the enforcement of these laws. Children are still seen hawking wares even during school hours. Many parents and others in the society are not even aware of the existence of the law and the provisions. Many children themselves are ignorant. All these seem to be sustaining child hawking in Nigeria.

Another sustaining factor to child hawking is the payment of lip service to UBE (Universal Primary Education), which incorporates free education up to Junior Secondary 3. Again the law has been passed, primary schools are not expected to pay fees but fees are still paid in secondary schools. Even in primary schools where fees are not paid, other levies such as parent-teacher's levies, hand work levies and the like are still collected. In most primary schools, owing to lack of infrastructure, pupils provide for themselves desks and stools. Of course books and uniforms are still provided by

parents for their wards. These provide some of the supposed reasons why children should hawk to supplement their school requirements.

Over enjoyment of making money, and in some cases personal funds, increases in the child the desire to hawk. This holds true considering the Freudian principle of fixation. The principle states that frustration or over enjoyment at any early stage of development would impede the individual from progressing successfully to the next stage. Even when he eventually assumes the next stage of development, some characteristics of the particular stage at which he fixated would be enduring, and may last through out life. The child in hawking therefore over enjoys making personal money, sees the immediate gains and appropriates it as more important than attending school.

It is no gain over emphasizing the fact that in the present society, parents have almost completely lost control of their children. They can no longer pressurize their children to obey them just for obedience sake. Therefore, children are often seen taking decisions in defiance to parental advice. Sometimes these decisions may not augur well for them in later life. A case in point is child hawking to the detriment of his childhood education.

Child's upbringing used to be a collective venture such that the general public used to feel as much concerned about the behaviour of children irrespective of who the parents were. Today, it may be attributed to societal change and urbanization, people so mind their businesses that children relatively have their way. The society and parents end up not supervising sufficiently the behaviour of children in contemporary times.

When we talk about child hawking and sustaining factors, we cannot leave out the adult public. Hawkers are encouraged when there are buyers to their wares. If the wares are not patronized, it would be senseless hawking them. Wares hawked by children are certainly patronized by adults thereby providing motivation for continued hawking.

### **Recommendations**

Having looked at child hawking and noting that it violates the rights of the child, trains children negatively, it behooves on us to seek remedies to the situation. The abolition of child hawking should be concern of every citizen. The government has started by the enactment of the law against child hawking. What remains is for public enlightenment to be carried out. This, non-governmental organizations can help to a great extent. When parents, other adults and even children themselves are

enlightened on the dangers of child hawking, the tendency would be reduced. Moreover, when they all know the penalty attached to child hawking, people would be unwilling to indulge in the act.

Apart from sensitization and enlightenment, there is need to actually arrest and prosecute offenders of this provision. A few cases would serve as a deterrent to others who would want to continue in child hawking. Furthermore, only pronouncement of Universal Basic Education is not sufficient. More attempts and provisions should be engaged in by the government to make education truly free. Apart from education being free, compulsion should be also be addressed such that the offence of being out of school would be seen and felt as punishable by law.

The trend of giving children out as house helps is greatly reduced in the today society. Further actions and enlightenment are still needed until a complete stop is achieved. In fact, the duty to stop child hawking for the betterment of our society should be a collective and a massive campaign. Without a multi-sectorial approach, child hawking would be quite resistant to remedy.

## **Conclusion**

In this discussion, we have seen that child hawking constitutes a damaging component of child abuse. Forms and effects of this phenomenon have been exposed. The implications of these to the present and future of African families and society have been discussed. Basically, it has been seen that there is crisis in the present and if not checked, there would be ever further crises in the future. To this end, free and compulsory education which has been enacted should be pursued with more sincerity of purpose. Laws abolishing child hawking should be implemented with more seriousness. Recommendations on how to get these about have been discussed in detail so that child hawking which is putting the African family in crises would be checked.

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