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CHILD LABOUR & ITS SOCIO-ECONOMIC EFFECTS ON NIGERIAN FAMILIES

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Introduction

Childhood is expected to be the best time to lay a balance socio-emotional stability for an expected adult. It is during childhood that the ingredients on which the child should grow is expected to be put in place. It is in recognition of this that United Nations have put in place the "Rights of the child to which Nigeria is a signatory. These rights have attempted to eliminate all forms of impediments which would hamper the optimal growth and development of the child. Furthermore, the document has made efforts to put in place those conditions which will enable the child to grow and develop to a stable and an emotionally balanced adult. Unfortunately the economic realities in Nigeria have militated against the rights of the child such that child abuse becomes a resultant effect with child labour being at the fore front of the abuse. This paper X-rays what constitutes child labour, it's Implication to the child and society and the specific effects of child labour on Nigerian families.

What is Child Labour?

Child labour as the name implies refers to the engagement of an individual below the age of 18 in hard physical work. It also refers to the application of the child's energy to materially productive engagements to which the child in question may not have the choice. In Hornby's (1974) view, labour is synonymous with work especially hard physical work". One may asked in what forms can we find child labour?

Child labour can be seen in:

- 1 Children hawking wares like paw-paw, cucumber, groundnuts, biscuits, pure water and the like.
- 2 Children carrying blocks for bricklayers at building sites.
- 3 Children baby sitting other babies either for their mothers or for a mistress.
- 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. For the up keep of their families of origin.
- 8 Children rearing animals like cows, sheep and goats.
- 9 Children engaged in commercial sex activities.
- 10 Children serving as motor boys/conductors.

All these are ways in which children are forced into economic exploitation in violation to the child's rights as recorded in National Child Rights Implementation Committee (1990) and Ayo Atsenuwa (1996).

No young person shall be employed in an employment which is injurious to his health, dangerous or immoral.

CAUSES OF CHILD LABOUR

At the proclamation and discussion of the rights of the child, every well-meaning individual feels very satisfied with the elaboration of the said rights. At a closer look, the child's rights have been severally abused major among them is the question of child labour. Almost every Nigerian seems to be a victim. Causative factors are not far-fetched.

In the first place, the engagement of the child in strenuous work which exposes him to health hazards has been blamed on the general down turn of the economy. The average Nigerian family cannot afford three square meals a day. Other necessities of life like adequate health care and housing are also far-fetched. The struggles of the parents alone seem not to be bringing in enough to cater for the necessities of the family. What parents and guardians resort to is any avenue which would yield income irrespective of who is involved. The same case has been reported in Haiti (McIvor 1998).

Traditional practices and belief also come in as a cause to child labour. Many people often quote this bible verse to support their action;

"Train up a child when he is young and when he is old he will not depart from it". Child labour is seen by many as an appropriate training of the child to grow up to be hard working and a productive member of the society. He is therefore taught trading by hawking, to be strong by engaging him at construction sights and a skill by getting him to work on farms.

Eka (1997:48) reports that children take part in some domestic work at a very early age, say, about three or four years. According to him "boys assist their fathers in mat-weaving for thatched roofs, repairing roofs, accompanying them to wine tapping, collection of palm fruits and tending yam tendrils ... The girls, on the other hand, assist in carrying palm fruits, looking after younger siblings, working with their mothers at home and helping in the preparation of food" (Eka 1997:49). He sees the amount of work engaged in by children to increase as they (the children) grow older in age. He conceives that these children learn as they work and parents regard these aspects of their (children's) work as important for the maintenance of the family.

Another basic belief is that a lazy child will eventually steal as he would not be able to provide for himself. This makes the typical adult not allow the child any substantial time for leisure. This, the adult does consciously.

The above is tied up to the training which the child is expected to acquire. In some cases it is the profession of his home. So irrespective of his inclination, he is expected to have acquired that profession in addition. Such professions include blacksmithing, fishing and farming. Where it is not the profession of the family, a conscious effort is made to attach him as an apprentice to a master to learn the trade. Eka (1997) also reports that Nigerian parents encourage their children to have paid employment. This they do by ensuring that these children acquire a lucrative skill early in life.

Other causative factors include the inability of the parents to provide sufficiently for the Child's needs. Basic needs like clothes, slippers, under wears and in some cases school fees, when not provided for the child, gives the child the urge to engage in hard labour which may not be prescribed for his age, so as to provide these basic necessities for himself.

Another dimension to child labour is caused by the truancy of the child in question. It is often erroneously believed by children that there is freedom on the streets. At the slightest provocation, some children escape from homes and decide to live on their own where they will not be supervised. The exigencies of life, food, drugs where needed and other needs compel him to engage in paid jobs, some of which may be hazardous to his health and well being. The above are some of the causes of child labour as experienced in Nigeria. No matter the cause, the basic question which must be adequately examined to lay credence to whether child labour is desirable or not is "What are the implications of child labour to the child and the society."

IMPLICATIONS OF CHILD LABOUR TO THE CHILD AND SOCIETY

The value of formal education is placed high in several countries of the world. Many countries like the United States of America, which can afford it, make formal education free and compulsory to a certain age depending on their economy. Nigeria on her own part had in 1976 attempted "Universal primary education". She has also made primary education free with the assumption that children below the age of 12 – the estimated age below which one is still in the primary school – will stay in and benefit from formal primary education. Unfortunately this is not the case. As observed by Obinaju (1995), many Nigerian children engage in different forms of child labour. This engagement interferes with the child's attempts at giving adequate attention to his studies. In most cases, children completely stay back from school to engage in one form of child labour or the other. This is the case where education is terminated for the child to go into financial gainful employment. Where this is not the case, the child spends some time of the day in school and takes up his chores directly after closing hours. Which ever is the case, this practice promotes mediocrity. Obinaju (1997) while examining causes of poor performance in Nigerian schools enumerates absenteeism of students and students' lack of seriousness as some of the causes of poor performance in schools. These may be direct results of child labour.

A child who stops his education prematurely and possibly spends a long time before having the opportunity to go back to school will lack the interest to go back. He, who engages in child labour on part time basis lacks sufficient time to attend to his education. Both obviously do not promote the acquisition of what formal education provides to its optimal level.

In the case where for reason of economic independence or for lack of parental provision for the child, the child goes into child labour, it is observed that the child in question achieves this independence a bit too early in life. Consequent upon this, he tends not to respect age as he is disappointed and has no faith in his parents' capability. By extension every other adult is a failure in his eyes. Respect for elders, a value which is held high in every Nigerian culture is, by its means, lost. Do we need to now ask the question "why is the youth of today so disrespectful?"

Over working the child retards his growth. Faw (1980) and Mitchell (1984) corroborate this assertion. Both see this phenomenon as depriving the child of adequate rest thereby resulting in retarded growth. Physical carrying of heavy wares as in the case of child hawker and those working on building sites retard growth.

Where the child engages himself in working with chemicals like in the battery charger's workshop, detergent production factory or in acquisition of recyclable materials from rubbish heaps, it is needless to say that this type of work poses serious health hazards of which the child may not be very conscious. He would ignorantly go on to work and expose himself to the impending dangers of the job situation.

Child labour is productive especially when the immediate material benefits are taken into consideration but in more than just one way, there are several psychological implications of this practice. In consideration of these implications, it would pay Nigerians to minimize child labour so as to groom our younger generation properly for challenges ahead.

SPECIFIC EFFECTS ON NIGERIAN FAMILIES

1 *It promotes mediocrity and half baked expertise.*

Child labour does not permit the child to remain in the location of training until he completes the course of training. Children hop out of school to engage in child labour and in such circumstances, they do not complete their education nor do they get sufficiently groomed. Because of this mediocrity, children from a family where child labour thrives cannot have highly priced jobs because they cannot be qualified for such jobs.

2 *It promotes lack of respect*

Children are sent to mingle with adults at places where they would have to fight for survival. Quite often they take to insults for them to have their way. In another consideration, when they make the money they feel they need for survival, they no longer take instructions from parents. In this way they assert undue independence which will affect the social life of the family.

3 *It entrenches rivalry.*

Different children would be seen hustling for higher paid jobs such that a brother could undermine another in order to supersede him in earnings.

4 *It promotes recklessness of members*

Children scarcely put their money to proper use. Because they have gained independence from parental control over their money they also gain independence from parental control over their behaviour. It can be seen that children indulge in excessive intake of alcohol, cigarettes, and in some cases Indian hemp simply because they can afford the cost of these items.

5 *It promotes lack of cooperation and common course*

When different individuals in a family make their own money and also make their own decisions as to what to do with the money, one notices that whereas the parents would be interested in repairs of the family house, the child may be interested in keeping abreast with fashion or getting involved in sexual promiscuity. This often engenders quarrels between the older and the younger members of the family.

6 *It breeds quarrels and hatred*

As it has already been explained, members of the family cannot be seen having the same focus. So there are bound to be quarrels and quarrels breed hatred and other vices.

7 *It encourages truancy and delinquency*

In all the examples taken so far, the child's health is affected in one way or the other. The mere engagement in the physical strain retards his growth, stopping his education retards his positive development. Indulging in illicit sexual affairs exposes him/her to health hazards just like smoking of cigarettes and other dangerous substances. Furthermore, parents can scarcely have the needed assistance expected when children are away at labour sites. When they are emancipated as a result then the story is worse as these children would even expect parents to serve them.

8 *It works against the health of family members.*

When a child engages in antisocial activities which will neither benefit him nor the society he is said to be delinquent. When he ceases to obey laid down authorities he is said to be truant. In the examples given above, it is clear that child labour promotes truancy and delinquency in children.

Remedies:

We are very used to identifying a problem in our society and discussing it in details at different fora. Quite often we go as far as suggesting solutions to these problems. Hardly do we go beyond this stage. As far as child labour is concerned, it is here recommended that this body should call for a legislation abolishing child labour. This can be done by sponsoring a bill to the house of assembly both at the state and federal levels calling for a total abolition of child labour. When this has been passed to law the next task of implementation arises.

In implementation, members could be mobilized to report all seen cases of child labour to law enforcement agencies. When individual members backed up by the association are committed to the course and law enforcement officers are made to do their work, there will be a significant reduction in the phenomenon.

In addition, there is need for sustained campaigns and public enlightenment especially as it regards the dangers of child labour and the relationship between child labour and the subsequent health of the family members.

CONCLUSION

This paper has defined child labour. It has highlighted the different forms as well as causes of child labour. In discussing the effect of child labour to the child and the society and in relation to the socio-economic life of the family, child labour has been seen as a plague. There is great need to legislate and enforce sanctions in order to stop child labour in our society. In addition, every well meaning organization has been called upon to join in the campaign to eradicate this hydra-headed monster called child labour. It is believed that when the recommendations of this paper are implemented, child labour would be considerably reduce if not completely stopped.

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