
Culture And Child Abuse In Nigeria

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Abstract

Cultural practises have been observed to increase the abuse of children in Nigeria. This paper discusses the effects of cultural practices on the abuse of children in Nigeria. Some of the cultural practices discussed are early marriage, female genital mutilation, and desire for large family size. It was suggested that public enlightenment programmes and free social services should be provided to help control the situation.

Introduction

The problem of child abuse is very prevalent in the Nigerian society. The problem arose as result of various factors which include economic, social, and cultural. It is accompanied by adverse consequences to the child, family and society. This paper discusses the influence of some of the cultural practices prevalent in Nigeria on child abuse. The aim of the study is to bring to limelight how some cultural practices increase the problem of child abuse in Nigeria, and suggest ways of controlling the situation. Data for the study was collected through the use of participant observation and secondary documents such as previous research works.

Child abuse has been defined as the “physical or emotional mistreatment and neglect of children or the sexual exploitation in circumstances for which the parents can be held responsible through acts of commission or omission” (Doye, 1990). The word ‘parent’ includes natural, adoptive, step and foster parents. The Wikipedia Free Encyclopedia (Wikipedia, 2009), defined child abuse as the “physical, psychological or sexual maltreatment of children”. Child abuse can be described as a situation where a child is denied his basic/fundamental human right as a child/person. According to Ciroma (2007), “a child is a person who is below the age of 18 years. The child is not given adequate care and protection by his parents/guardians. He is denied the right to education, religion, movement, freedom, shelter and is exposed to unnecessary hardship which may affect him/her negatively. Child abuse is caused by various factors which include personal, social and cultural (Dubois and Miley, 2010; Sossou and Yogtiba, 2008).

Culture in its simplest form can be described as the way of life of a people. It “embodies the philosophy, worldview, behaviour patterns, arts and institutions of a people” (Falola, 2010). Nigeria as a country is made up of people from different ethnic groups and cultural practices with the dominant groups being the Igbos, Hausas and Yorubas. Some of the cultural practices have contributed to the abuse of children currently observed in the country. The cultural practices which have aided the abuse of children in the country are; early marriage, female genital mutilation, religious belief, desire for large family, and preference for male children.

Early Marriage

Early marriage refers to marriage of persons below the age of 18years (Mamman 2000 and Yoloh, 2001). Data (Karly, Ogedemgbe and Ajala 2008) show that girls are mostly affected. Early marriage is practised in different parts of Nigeria but more in the Northern

parts of Nigeria (among the Muslims). These young girls are given into marriage for various reasons, which include economic, maintenance of chastity and maintenance of family name (UNICEF, 2001). Early marriage is considered abuse because the girl's consent is not sought for and it exposes the girls to various social, psychology, economic, and health problems. The most common health problem experienced being Vesico Vaginal Fistulae. This diseases occur at child birth due to the fact that the "pelvic of the girls are not fully developed and they find it very difficult to deliver their babies (Akpan 2003). Yolah (2001) quoting the Federal Ministry of Health show there are about 200,000 to 400,000 cases of VVF in Nigeria with up to 10,000 cases occurring annually. The victims of the disease suffer from both physical ailment and social isolation. The social isolation occurs because of the offensiveness of the injury. In some cases where the ailment is not properly treated the victim may die.

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) - Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) is another cultural practised that leads to child abuse. FGM is widely practiced in Nigeria (Osifo and Evbuomwan, 2009; Nigeria 2009). FGM involves the "partial or total removal of the external female genital and/or injury to the female genital organs whether for cultural or any one non-therapeutic reasons (WHO, 2010). It is classified into four categories viz Type I-clitoridectomy which involves the partial or total removal of the clitoris; Type II-excision which involves the partial or total removal of the clitoris and the labia minora with or without excision of the labia major, Type III-infibulations which is the narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal, and lastly Type IV which includes all other harmful procedures to the female genital such as picking, piercing, incising, scrapping and cauterizing the genital area. Types I, II and type III, are mostly practised in Nigeria (NDHS2003).

FGM is carried out for various cultural reasons such as maintenance of chaste and virginity before marriage, increasing sexual pleasure of the husbands, fidelity during marriage, and intake of women into womanhood, and for health reasons. FGM affects the victims adversely. Some of the undesired effects are "clitoral cyst formation, haemorrhage, kidney damage, damage to organs surrounding the clitoris and labia, painful sexual intercourse and in some cases death. (Osifo and Evhuomwam, 2009).

FGM is considered an abuse because it is mostly carried out at a young age without the consent of the girl. Further, it has some hazardous health consequences for the girl. These include reproductive track infections, trauma and death through severe bleeding. Thus it violates the person's right to health, security, physical integrity and life.

Religious Practices – Some religious beliefs and practices obtainable in the country also lead to child abuse. These are the practice of Almajiri, belief in child witches and belief held about children with disability.

Practice of Almajiri – The word 'Almajiri' emanated from Arabic word 'AL-MUHAJIRIN' which came as a result Prophet Mohammed's migration from Mecca to Medina. In Hausa land Almajiri refers to "children sent from their homes and entrusted into the care of Islamic teachers to learn the Islamic studies" (Obioha, 2009) Almajiri are found mostly in the Northern part of Nigeria. They are usually between the ages of seven to fifteen. Originally, the idea was for these children to be sent out from the homes to learn Qu'ranic education in traditional way under the care of a Mallam". However, this system changed and the children are now left to wade about the streets, and beg for alms in order to sustain themselves and their mallams (Thinkquest, 2010). They neither receive the Islamic education nor the western education. Almajiri practice leads to child abuse in the sense that the children

are exposed to laborious work at tender age (between 6 to 17years), lack the necessities of life and plunged into poverty and its attendant evils and may not be trained in any skill.

Children with disability – Another group of people that are abused as a result of cultural factors are children with disabilities. They experience neglect and abuse because of the taboo and traditional beliefs that surround them. Through currently there is no data on the number of children with disability in the country; data (UNESCO2007, Lang and Upah 2008) show that children with disability experience maltreatment significantly more often than their peers. Their educational needs are unmet, and they suffer from exclusion from school and other social activities basically because of the traditional beliefs and customs, which see disability as a curse or the manifestation of sin and disgrace. The consequence of this is that these children are not trained to be independent and productive and thus left at the mercy of destiny.

Child Witches – Children witches are another group of child abuse under the umbrella of religion and religious belief. Though the idea of child witch is not a Christian theology or /culture, the perpetrators carry out their activities under the umbrella of religion and Christian worship. The practise is common in Awka Ibom and Cross River States of Nigeria where about 15,000 children have been branded child witches (Katimi, 2009). The cause of the problem stems from the self-professed pastors who claim that they have the powers to deliver the people from witchcraft. The Pastors identify these children and inform their parents to punish them so as to escape any ill luck that the child witches can cause to the family “the children are blamed for causing illness, death, and destruction (Katimi, 2009). The pastors advise the parents and communities to give the child witches severe punishments so cleanse the child witches of their magical powers. Some of the punishments given to the child witches are incarceration in the church, flogging, starvation, severe physical torture in order to get a confession, and in some cases outright killing. The practice of child witches is considered an abuse because it denies the child his fundamental human rights of feeding, clothing, shelter, expose him to severe health problems, and in extreme cases denial of life.

Desire for Large Family Size: The desire for large family sizes among Nigerians is another cultural factor that leads to child abuse in Nigeria. Although statistics show that the birth rate in Nigeria has reduced to 5.9 (Wikipedia Encyclopaedia, 2010), this however obtains more among the literate group. The non-literate population still give birth to large family size of seven to nine children which they cannot properly provide for with respect to education, feeding, clothing, and accommodation. Consequently, the parents either send the children into the street to hawk goods or give them up to relative/foster parents who may use them as money raising machine. The children sell goods early in the morning before going to school and late in the evening when they come back from school or in some cases do not go to school at all. The consequence is that most of the children go to school very late and find it difficult to cope with the academic activities, while some unfortunate ones may fall into the hands of people who assault them sexually, or get accidents as they run to sell their wares or may be kidnapped. Thus, the children are denied their fundamental human rights and because they are not properly trained fall in poverty.

Preference for Male Children: The last cultural factor that enhances the abuse of children in Nigeria is preference for male child. In Nigeria, male children are held in high esteem and giving preferential treatment over the female children (Ogunfowokan and Ewere, 2009). This is because the male children maintain the family genealogy by marrying wives

and procreating children who bear the family name. The girl children are denied their basic rights mainly education. These consequently lead to the abuse of the girl children as they are not properly trained to take care of them children

Effects of Child Abuse

Child abuse has undesired consequences for both the child, and the society at large. The consequences include poverty, poor health, emotional problems and social isolation (Olatawura 2009, Obioha 2009, Osifo and Evbuowman, 2009).

Poverty – The abused children are usually not equipped to live independent lives. They neither receive western education nor trained in any skill so that they can be financially independent and they end up in poverty and its associated evils. The girl child is usually the most affected as they are denied basic rights, used for unpaid and invisible jobs, tailored towards causes of home keeping and child rearing and bearing, their training is regarded as bad investment leading to illiteracy, uninformed mind, vulnerability, disadvantaged in the labour market, dumb in communication matters and invariably poverty (Umuobi, 2010). In Katcha community of Niger State, Nigeria, Oleribe (2007) found out that many girl children are denied education as a result of culture of ‘Egikpa’ whereby a girl children is given to another family for upkeeps and training and, ‘Sadakar’ –where girls (usually under-aged) are freely given to people as wives This practice of denying the female children basic education is also practised in other parts of country.

Poor Health – Due to some of these cultural practices especially FGM and early marriage, some of the children contract illness such as Sexually Transmitted Illness (STI), and Vesigo Vaginal Fistula (VVF), which may last throughout their life time or lead to premature death if not properly treated. This fact is confirmed by studies that have been carried out by (Akpan, 2003 and Yohah, 2001).

Emotional Problems – The abused children experience emotional problems. Some of the problems they experience include lack of confidence, depression, hostility, aggression, self-destructive behaviour and anxiety etc (Osifo and Evbuowman, 2009) in Nigeria. This arises from denial of opportunities for the children to assert themselves.

Social Isolation – The abused children suffer from social isolation as they are excluded from the society. This problem applies mostly to children with disability who the society perceived as being punished by God for their activities or that of their parents/family member and thus are not integrated and accepted in the society. Many of them feel rejected (Lang and Upah, 2008).

Conclusion and Recommendations

To reduce the abuse of children as a result of cultural practices, the following recommendations are made:

- (1) Public Enlightenment Programme:** The Ministry of Women Affairs and Gender especially the Departments of Social Welfare and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) concerned with issues of children should carry out public enlightenment programmes on the negative effects of these cultural practices in different communities in the country and encourage parents/guardians of children/wards to desist from such practice. The public enlightenment programmes can be carried out using various media viz radio, newspaper, and television, films. It will help to raise social awareness/consciousness on the undesired consequences

of these cultural practices and encourage parents/guardians to desist from such practices.

- (2) **Enforcement of the Implementation of the Child Rights Acts** – The government should enforce the implementation of the Child Rights Act 2003 by the different States of the country. The Child Rights Act contains measures that can be taken against a person that abuses a child or carries out activities that jeopardizes the rights of the child. However, these measures are not implemented because some States of the Federation have not adopted the Act and those that did have not made any conscious effort to implement the Act. The government at both Federal and State levels should put the mechanisms that will ensure that the act is enforced in all the states of the Federation. This will help to reduce the rate at which individuals perpetuate abusive acts on children.
- (3) **Free Social Services:** The government should provide free social services for children at least up to age of 18years. Two types of social services that are of great importance here are education and health. The provision of free education and free health services will ensure that children from poor homes can get formal education (at least up to secondary school level) and also free medical treatment in times of illness. This will help to minimize the practice of alamajiri, and denial of education to the girl child. If these measures are taken and cultural values maintained in the positive direction, child abuse in the country will be minimized and good cultural values upheld.

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