

Child Labour: A Public Health Problem in Nigeria

Mfrekemfon P. Inyang PhD¹ and Ebirien, Umaror Ralph²

*1,2 Department of Human Kinetics and Health Education, Faculty of Education
University of Port Harcourt, Choba, Nigeria.*

Abstract: *Child labour is the employment of children in any work that deprives them of their childhood, interferes with their ability to attend regular school, this is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful. This has become a concern not only at the international level but national as well because of the unhealthy circumstances and multiple health implications children are subjected to. Child labour does not only deprive children of their education but also their physical and mental development. Some of the causes of child labour identified in this work are poverty, unemployment, low income, corruption, demand for cheap labour and many others. Different measures put in place by the federal government and NGOs to deal with the issue of child labour include, The Child's Rights Act (CRA) 2003, Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act 2003. Nevertheless, even with these laws, child labour has persisted till date. It is suggested in this paper that the Government should not only make laws but should create reasonable measures to implement the laws against child labour before the future generation of the country is wiped out.*

Keywords: *Childlabour, health, Problem, Public. Nigeria*

I. Introduction

Children are precious gifts given to man by God for the progression of human race. They are very tender, fragile and gentle hence they need protection and tender loving care from parents and the society. It is very necessary these children be brought up adequately. The future of a country depends on the youths and children¹. The welfare of every community, its growth and development depends on the health, strength and wellbeing of the child. The practice of child labour is an old tradition that has existed before 1940². It includes monetary and non-monetary activities which are mentally, physically, morally, and socially hazardous, inhuman and degrading to the ethos of the children³. Child labour is the employment of children in an industry or business especially when it is illegal or considered exploitative.

⁴Child labour is defined as work that deprives children of their childhood, potentials, dignity, and work that is harmful to their physical and mental development. ILO gave the effect of child labour as mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children. Child labour interferes with their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to attend school and obliging them to leave school prematurely or requiring them to attempt to combine school attendance with excessively long and heavy work. Whether or not a particular form of work can be called child labour depends on the child's age, the type of work and the hours of work performed, the conditions under which it is performed and the objective pursued by individual Countries⁵. In its most extreme forms, child labour involves children being enslaved, separated from their families, exposed to serious hazards and illness and/or left to fend for themselves on the streets of major cities⁶.

Many children were employed in different sectors, some below the ages of 14. They worked in Europe, United States and various colonies of the European powers. Child labour played an important role in the industrial revolution, wages earned by the children were meant to augment their parent's meager incomes⁷. In developing countries due to rapid population growth, high rates of unemployment, inflation, poverty, malnutrition, bad leadership, corruption and low wages, child labour has proven over the years to be a problem which is here to stay³. In order to protect and secure the human rights of the children, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted as far back as 1948 proclaimed that children are entitled to special care and protection. The UN Convention on the rights of the child adopted in 1989, stated in its Article 6, that every child has the right to live and develop and that the state parties should ensure the maximum possible extent for the survival and the development of a child.

Article 32 of the UN Convention on the right of the child commands state parties to recognize the rights of the child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development⁸. Even with these laws on child life protection, development and general upbringing, child labour has remained a major obstacle to social development, it is a challenge and long-term goal in many countries of the world to abolish all forms of child labour. Despite all the rights accruing to the African child ranging from right to peaceful assembly, thought, religion, protected private life, safety, guarding

the child against hazardous work, child's right to education, health, social, mental, spiritual and moral development, to mention a few⁹. The abuse of child's right has become a social problem all over the world.

In Nigeria, child labour is wide spread and has been accepted by many people as part of normal life. The increase in child labourers in the past decades has made it a full blown industry, especially in the urban areas. This is largely attributed to the economic situation of the country, which has led to the involvement of children as substantial contributors to their family's income by working as workshop apprentices, domestic workers, and street hawkers in the urban center¹⁰. In Nigeria, children under 14 years of age are working across the country and are exposed to long hours of work in dangerous and unhealthy environments carrying too much responsibility for their age. This is evident by children seen hawking items, carrying loads in the market places, water fronts and motor parks, some on construction sites helping to carry blocks, used as cheap labourers, fetching water to earn money and selling food within the neighbourhood. Others sell items such as snacks, pure water and drinks in between cars on express roads, some as beggars and car washers¹¹. The Government of Nigeria has not kept mute on the damaging effect of this monster and thus has put in place various constitutions and legislations, policies and brought in many programmes to protect the interest of the child.

II. Forms Of Child Labour

Child labour are of various types ranging from work done by very young children, long hours of work on a regular full time basis, hazardous working conditions that is work that exposes children to physical and mental dangers such as hawking on major streets, prostitution, quarrying, work that deprive them access, attendance or progress in school, works that exposes them to abusive treatment by their employer such as slavery¹².¹³ gave the following as forms of child labour as children who are employed in different places to render services in fast food restaurant, carrying heavy loads that strain their backs, operate machineries without proper training. These children get harassed especially the female children by older men while carrying out their services. Most children employed as domestic workers are being denied education. Such labourers are called all sorts of names as house mates, house helps, house girls/boys. Such domestic service is not to be hazardous but most times children in the domestic service living with or without their parents are not well taken care of.¹⁴ stated that most children especially girls are frequently being verbally and physically abused on the job. Some even complained that they are tired of being beaten and wounded.

According to¹⁵ in Nigeria, the demand for the use of children for domestic services is anchored on the push and pull factor. The push factor resulting in the demand of use of children for domestic service is Poverty, while the pull factor on the other hand, results from the increase of entry of married women into the labour market, thus necessitating their demand for house helps. While many children work to support their families, many are alone or in company of others working to sustain themselves¹⁶. These increase the task and troubles found every day in the society. To survive, many children have turned into selling scrap metals picked from refuse dump, used clothes, fruits, car washing, parking cars for people, escorting elders or blind adults or become tools of destruction in the society by terrorist's groups who finds them cheap and easy to brain wash. Some even become arm robbers and militants just to help them live in big cities. So much dangers and obstacle are involved ranging from being battered and abused to getting killed. Despite this, 100 millions of children are living out there in the streets¹⁷. In some parts of the world, children gather at hotel premises waiting for tourists to hire them for little money as room cleaners, music performers, transportation providers, sport equipment hawkers, tour guards.

III. Causes of Child Labour

The dramatic increase in child labour can be attributed to several factors. The rapid population growth of many less developed countries, high rates of unemployment, inflation, low wages and deplorable working conditions have contributed to incidence of child labour as children attempt to help and support their families. The major cause of child abuse is economic that is associated with poverty. The hawking of wares and food products on the roads and major parks is an economic means of making ends meet either sponsored by their parents or the child personal interest¹⁸. Cultural beliefs in treating the child are also another cause of child abuse as children are seen more as mere properties of their parents¹⁹. Another cause is violence against the child caused by emotions on the part of parents, guardians or ignorance.

Several reasons have been put forward as predisposing factors to child labour. These factors include poverty, high cost of leaving, lack of sponsorship, poor school performance, single parenthood, large family size, peer group pressure, poor home conditions, lack of parental care, parents' unemployment, parental pressure, poor scholastic achievement¹⁹. Under unemployment in Nigeria has made provisions of social welfare services like education, healthcare, water supply and energy not only inadequate, but expensive, thereby encouraging parents to resort to child labour and exploitation. Hence, some Nigerian parents and guardians abuse their children through street hawking or prostitution in order to support family income and this is encouraged because it is convenient for those who purchase their needs while in the traffic, motor parks, offices,

buses and Hotels²⁰. Child labour and street hawking can be attributed to urbanization and modernization. ²¹opined that people who migrate from rural areas to urban areas in search of better prospects are often ill prepared for urban life and therefore are forced to either use their children or other children to enhance their economic situation²². In many countries, legislation is weak to support its workers and therefore since children are unaware of their rights, they become victims of child labour.

IV. Government Intervention On Child Labour In Nigeria

Since the ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) 1989, the AU Charter on the Right and Welfare of the child and other relevant international instruments, Nigeria has instituted various legislative and institutional measures at both the Federal and State levels, aimed at addressing various forms of violence against children, some recently enacted legislations include the Child's Rights Act (CRA) 2003, Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act 2003, Ebonyi State Law No. 010 (2001) on the Abolition of Harmful Traditional Practices against Children and Women, Edo State Female Genital Mutilation (Prohibition) Law 2002, Edo State Criminal Code Amendment Law 2000, Bauchi State Hawking by Children (Prohibition) Edict of 1985 CAP 58, Cross River State Girl Child Marriages and Female Circumcision (Prohibition) Law 2000, The Sharia Penal Codes of Zamfara, Kano, Kebbi, Kaduna and Sokoto States of Nigeria equally protect children against various forms of physical and psychological violence²³.

The Government of Nigeria has evolved some institutions charged with child protection issues including protection against violence such as National and State Child Rights Implementation Committees, Child Development Departments in the Federal and State ministries of Women Affairs, National Council of Child Rights Advocates of Nigeria (NACCARAN) as the umbrella NGO involved in Child Rights Advocacy, Nigerian Children's Parliament, inaugurated by the President of Nigeria, National Agency for the Prohibiting of Traffic in Persons⁸. Federal Government has formally launched the National Policy and National Action Plan on child labour to facilitate the elimination of child labour in Nigeria aimed at ensuring that Nigeria children are provided with the bright future to be proud of²⁴.

Minister of Labour and Productivity, Chief Emeka Wogu, who performed the launching and presentation of the national documents to the public, in Abuja recently, said the launch followed the approval by the Federal Executive Council (FEC) in September last year. He noted that the success of the launch attested to the commitment of President Goodluck Jonathan's Transformation Agenda and the subsidy Reinvestment and Empowerment Programme, SURE-P, to the elimination of the challenge of child labour constituting a critical impediment to the nation's development efforts. He added that "the massive employment of youths and women through the Community Services Women and Youth Empowerment (CSWYE) scheme of the SURE-P has reduced drastically the high level of poverty in rural communities in Nigeria where child labour thrives most. The CSWYE program is a critical strategy for fighting poverty, especially rural poverty which has fuelled child labour and child trafficking in the country. The Policy also provides monitoring, evaluation and a review process with which to assess periodically the achievements recorded in our collective efforts at combating the scourge of child labour.

V. Health Implications Of Child Labour On The Child

Child labour exposes the child to a lot of hazards like sexual defilement, sexual assaults, neglects and threat of punishment for speaking out as exemplified above. The consequences of these acts usually result in an unwanted pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, psychological problems and a gradual withdrawal from a healthy relationship with the opposite gender⁸. ²⁵noted that street hawking exposes the male and female child to dangers posed by fraudsters and actual murderers because of their vulnerability at odd hawking hours. They are usually under personal jeopardy, harsh and hazardous conditions such as becoming an easy target to occult predators (ritual killers).

Child labour does not only deprive children of their education but also their physical and mental development is taken away from their childhood. Children may not be aware of the short and long term risk involved in their work. Due to their long hours of work, child labourers are normally denied basic education, normal social interaction, personal development and emotional support from their family and they may face physical danger and even death¹.²⁶ grouped the implications of street hawking by children into three, namely: Physical, Psychological and Social. Physical consequences include: accidents, spread of communicable diseases, food poisoning and traffic congestion. Psychological consequences of child street hawking include: stress, fatigue, depression, anger and resultant ills. Social implications include: unwanted pregnancies, prostitution, smoking, robbery, truancy and poor academic performance among others.

Hawkers on the street are exposed to numerous hazards ranging from physical violence to loss of wares, risks of accident, robbery, kidnapping and even murder for ritual purposes. Many children are employed as laborers in construction and farm operations because of the little money they would be ready to accept. Most of the time, they are exposed to snake bites, insect bites and suffer asthma or bronchitis after being exposed to

cement and pesticides. Some others have been mutilated while cutting with matchets in the farms²⁷. They are exposed to vagaries of weather (extremes of cold or heat), to insects and reptiles bites, to hunger and deprivation²⁸. The most troubling, perhaps, is the fact that some are sexually exploited and forced into prostitution with the risk of unwanted pregnancies and contracting sexually transmitted infections (including HIV/AIDS).²⁹ argued that child labour has physical consequences on the child. These range from malnourishment, disease, musculoskeletal disorders from heavy labour, physical and sexual abuse.³⁰ opined that child labour can result into injuries to the children and expose them to toxic agents in the process. Growth deficiency is common among child labourers. They tend to be shorter and lighter and grow with it into adult life. Long term health problems such as respiratory disease, asbestosis and different cancers are common in countries where they are forced to work with dangerous chemicals. HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases are common among children forced into prostitution³¹. Exhaustion and malnutrition result from children performing heavy manual labour for long hours under unbearable conditions and not having enough money to feed.

In Nigeria, the upsurge in child labourers has been partly attributed to the introduction of the economic policy of the Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) since the late 1980s. This economic policy affected the country's economy, leading to massive devaluation of the nation's currency and a decline in the standard of living and quality of life of most Nigerians³². It also resulted in a decay of public infrastructure and increase unemployment, especially in the urban centres. Consequently, most children have been forced to venture into various areas of labours in their attempts to survive and to assist their impoverished families³³. One of the sectors that employ children is agriculture. It is estimated that 1 out of 3 children involved in child labour must work for their own and/or their family's livelihood³⁴. This regularly exposes the child to long hours, hazardous equipment, pesticides and physical labour that is detrimental to a child's physical development and because their immune systems are not fully developed to mitigate the exposure to the pesticides, herbicides or fertilizer that contain toxins that hinder healthy development into adulthood. Other industries that use child labour experience record high occurrences of injuries as children must use tools otherwise designed for adults, such as construction equipment³⁵.

VI. Economic Implications Of Child Labour

Child labour affects not only the child but also the country in general. It is indeed a menace that must be curbed due to its harmful implications. Almagery, which is an offshoot of child labour has devastated the Nigerian economy to a great extent; killing people daily and destroying communities thereby displacing people from their homes and leaving most children orphans as parents are being killed causing a multiplier effect. Childhood, which by nature is earmarked for fun and excitement, education and enlightenment, is ruined by the compulsion to earn money. Working children are the epitome of abuse and exploitation and are often victims of their employers and sometimes even their parents³⁶.

These children in most cases are rendered crippled, unhealthy, and most importantly uneducated leading to low productivity. Many child labourers die before reaching the age of 18, and not even have made any impact on the country's future. Job positions requiring education may go unfilled and manual labour jobs may also see vacancies owing to the fact that the new workers are already crippled. This will certainly affect the nation's economy in a bad way. These children live in slums, abandoned properties of Government, bush paths, under bridges, refuse heaps, waterfronts etc. in clusters and most times these places are overcrowded with child labourers; some diseased, crippled, sickly and even dying³⁷. These slums and under bridges are polluted with urine, faeces, and refuse thus making our environments unhealthy. Also having unhealthy children employed at construction sites leave the other workers at risk, having these children mingle with other people on the streets exposes the country to health hazards.

The insurgency in the country caused by the Boko Haram sect in the Northern part and the Militancy activities of the Niger Delta region of Nigeria have to a great extent affect the economy of the country as manufacturing industries have been destroyed causing slow down on industrial output. Electrical infrastructures are also destroyed causes serious halt in production activities. Lack of security have made investors to leave the country and the ones outside are afraid to come and invest seeing that the country is not safe resulting to low economy future for Nigeria³⁶. Incessant bomb blast by the Boko Haram sect has destroyed so many social amenities ranging from schools, roads, mosques, churches and even hospitals. Electrical infrastructures are also destroyed displacing people from their homes and pouring them out to the streets. All of these are activities of child labourers who will do everything to earn money. Children involved in child labour are exposed to bad companies and so are manipulated to doing all sort of evil ranging from picking pocket to high level of criminality and prostitution. They are the cheap tools of destruction in the hands of extremists and terror groups. Example is the militants and boko haram sect and other terrorist groups who have become dangerous to the society³⁸.

VII. Factors Impeding The Eradication Of Child Labour In Nigeria

Child labour in Nigeria despite the policies and machineries put in place by the Government and NGOs is still on the increasing side due to the following factors such as Lack of Implementation of laws and policies. Laws upon laws have over time and even recent times being launched to curb child labour, the menace is on a geometric progression due to lack of implementation. It is one thing to make laws and another to implement the laws made. Most NGOs and private individuals suffer from lack of finance to finance orphanage homes and help street kids get off the stress³⁹. This can be frustrating as their heart desires to help humanity is crippled by lack of finance. Lack of Rehabilitation Centers to help remove and care and give them new orientation. Personnel and health professionals who are supposed to advise the government on child health and public health in general are untrained; even those in orphanages are not educated. People employed in these services should be trained on the job.

Carefree Society where the Law does not matter and we live in a society where laws are trampled upon by the high and low. Everyone feels free to do anything because the law enforcement bodies are less concerned about their jobs, everyone is waiting to be paid but none is ready to work⁴⁰. Under employment in Nigeria has made provision of social welfare services like education, healthcare, water supply and energy not only inadequate but also expensive, thereby promoting parents to resort to child labour and exploitation, abusing their children through street hawking or prostitution in order to support family income and encouraged because it is convenient for those who purchase their needs while in traffic, motor parks, office business centers and hotels⁴¹.

VIII. Conclusions

The phenomenon of child labour is a multi-dimensional complex problem and deep rooted in the socio-economic fabric of the society. So it may not be wise to rely on one single approach to deal with it. There are many factors responsible to this complex problem, so a comprehensive integrated approach is required to tackle and combat child labour. This can be done only by bringing attitudinal change, and social awareness and rigorous campaign against the problem of child labour. Thus it requires honest effort and strong commitment and support from all concerned.

IX. Suggestions

Health professionals are in key position to identify children at risk, advise the parents on ways to reduce this risk and recommend action to policy-makers. They should recognize and assess the occupational and environmental health threats present in the places where children live learn and play and work in the urban and rural communities. They should also know that these threats increase in low income populations and minority communities and in degraded environments.

Relevant stakeholders should be involved, such as the health and safety experts (who know about the hazards and health outcomes) labour inspectors (they know how to enforce the law) and general health experts (they know about the vulnerability and health outcomes in the child and are the first line care givers). Laws prohibiting child labour should be put in place and enforced to ensure that no child is found working when he/she is still underage. The Government should not only make laws but should create reasonable measures to implement the laws against child labour before the future generations of the country is wiped out. There should be inspection measures to ensure that enacted laws are obeyed to the least, trained personnel should be sent out to fields to do the job.

References

- [1]. Basu, Kaushik. (1998). "Child labor: Cause, consequence, and cure, with remarks on international labor standards". Policy Research Working Paper No. 2027. The World Bank, Washington, D.C.
- [2]. Hugh Hindman (2009). *The World of Child Labour*. M.E. Sharpe. USA.
- [3]. UNICEF, 1997. The state of the world's children. Available from www.unicef.org/soiveg/report
- [4]. International Labour Organization (2000). *Investigating Child Labour: Guidelines for Rapid Assessment, a field manual* : Geneva: ILO and UNICEF.
- [5]. Jane, H. (2010) *Childhood And Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution* p 33
- [6]. Dessy, Sylvain and Pallage, Stéphane (2003). *A Theory of the Worst Forms of Child Labour*. *Economic Journal* 115 (500), 68-87.
- [7]. UNICEF., 2000. Nigeria and the convention on the rights of the child. Lagos: Unicef country office.
- [8]. Ebigbo, P.O. and S. Abaga, 1990. Sexual experience of street trading girls in the city of Enugu.
- [9]. Donnell, O., Rosati, F.C & van Doorslaer, E., (2005). Health effects of child work: Evidence from rural Vietnam. *Journal of Population Economics* 18, 437-467.
- [10]. Khan, Rana Ejaz Ali (2001). *Socioeconomic Aspects of Child Labour: A Case Study of Children in Auto Workshops*. *The Lahore Journal of Economics* No. 6, No.1.
- [11]. Ebigbo, P.O., 2003. Street child: The core of child abuse and neglect in Nigeria. *Children, Youth and Environment*, 1-13
- [12]. Fawole, O.I., A. A.J. and K.O. Osungbade, 2003. Interventions for violence prevention among female workers in motor parks in south western Nigeria: A review of effectiveness *African Journal of Reproductive Health*, 7(1): 71-82.
- [13]. Oloko, B., 1989. Children's work in urban Nigeria: A case study of young Lagos street traders UNICEF Staff Working Paper, 4: 19-30.

- [14]. Hoyano, L. and C. Keenan, 2007. *Child abuse: Law and policy across boundaries* oxford. Oxford University Press.
- [15]. Aderinto, A. A. (2000). Social Correlates and Coping Measures of Street Child Children: A Comparative Study of Street and Non-Street Children in South-Western Nigeria. *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 24, 9, 1199-1213
- [16]. Nigerian Constitution., (1999), 12(3)
- [17]. Vanguard newspaper, on August 29th 2014
- [18]. Madunagu, E. (1999, June 16). The Child and the Uncertainty of Tomorrow. *The Guardian Newspaper*. June 16.
- [19]. Labour: Some Issues and Challenges for Future. *J. Hum Ecol.* 28.2
- [20]. International Labour Organization (2011). *Child Labour in India*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- [21]. Press.
- [22]. Nseabasi A and Abiodun J. (2010). The Menace of Child Abuse in Nigeria: A Case Study of Street Hawking in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State, Kamla-Raj 2010 *J SocSci*, 24(3): 189-192.
- [23]. Okafor, E.E. (2000). The Costs of Structural Adjustment, Modes of Adaptation and their Implications for Child Labour in Nigeria. W.S. Tile (ed). *Sociological Dimension: Book of Readings*. Enugu: Vougasen Publishers.
- [24]. Okafor, E.E. (1998). Workers' Adaptation and Work Commitment under Structural Adjustment A study in Lagos, Nigeria. An Unpublished Ph.D. thesis submitted to the Department of Sociology, University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
- [25]. Mishra, L. (2000). *Child labour in India*. New York: Oxford University Press. *Against child labour in India: an agency of the United Nations*, Geneva
- [26]. Okpukpara B.C. and Odurukwe N. (2003). Incidence and determinants of child labour in Nigeria: Implications for poverty alleviation. *Journal of Economic Policy* Vol. 10(2).
- [27]. Gier, (2004). In Their Own Words: Consequences of Child Labour in Nigeria, www.kreppublishers.com
- [28]. Amon, J.J, Buchanan J, Cohen J, Kippenberg J. *Int J Pediatr.* (2012) Child labor and environmental health: government obligations and human rights. Hindawi Publishing Corporation *International Journal of Pediatrics* Volume 2012.
- [29]. Bassey, E.N, Baghebo, M. Out, C. A. (2012). Child Labour in Nigeria and its Economic Implications: Case study of Calabar Municipality. *Research on Human and Social Sciences* ISSN 2222-1719. (Online) Volume 2, N0 9.
- [30]. UN General Assembly. (2006). Rights of the child. Accessed on 11 February 2011.
- [31]. Yadav, S., and Sengupta, G. (2011). Environmental and Occupational Health Problems of Child.
- [32]. Willis, B., and Levy, B. "Child prostitution: global health burden, research needs, and interventions." *Lancet*. 359.9315 (2002). Accessed on 8 February 2011.