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INTRODUCTION

Concern for the young appears universal in all human groups. To a large extent, the basis of this concern may be biological: for, unless the young are adequately cared for and protected, the continued existence of the species may be in great jeopardy.

In human societies, this quasi-innate behaviour has undergone the process of institutionalisation so that it now finds expression in the customs, folklore, beliefs, mores and traditions of different peoples. In Nigeria, for instance, as in most other African countries, the cultural norms and value systems place a very high premium on children and this has manifested itself in numerous proverbs, adages and personal names of Nigerians. Thus, the Edo of Nigeria equate the child with a crown, the Igbo (also known as Ibo) say 'Nwa ka ahu', meaning that the worth of the child is far greater than material wealth, and other Nigerian groups hold very similar notions of the worth of the child. Implicit in these statements and expressions is societal concern for the care and general well-being of children.

However, experience has shown that both in Nigeria and elsewhere, attitudes towards children are so full of contradictions that it is difficult to use them as reasonable indicators of reality. Thus, all too often, professions of love for the child are motivated by adult-centred interests and expressions of good will fail to be borne out in actual practice. This paradox whereby the status of children appears to be lowest in those societies which place the highest valuation on them. For instance, writing of the Gusi-Ngongos of Kenya, Robert and Levine report: 'Before the time of their initiation into adulthood, both boys and girls are considered to be of inferior status'. Because of this
In spite of expressions of sentiment to the contrary, the situation of children in many societies is that of a voiceless minority. It is generally held that children are ordered about like servants and punished freely. In some societies, it was customary not to serve children frequent "doses" of meat so that they did not grow up to become wasteful or fast after meat. On the whole, in spite of expressions of sentiment to the contrary, the situation of children in many societies is that of a voiceless minority — a situation which makes them particularly vulnerable to attack and maltreatment by other groups in society.

Thus, while child maltreatment appears to be a universal phenomenon, what acts are regarded as abusive differ considerably according to societal norms and value orientations. For instance, physical violence is brought into much prominence in current Western literature on this subject that the impression is inadvertent given that child abuse is merely synonymous with child beating or "battering." Perhaps it is the realization of this which leads Cantwell to caution that physical abuse is far from being the only area of concern. "There are other manifestations of maltreatment, such as abandonment and exploitation both within and outside the family, which, according to the country concerned, may require more immediate response and priority." 6

With the foregoing in view, one of the aims of this article is to present empirical information on what Nigerians perceive to be child abuse, as well as the various forms it takes. Secondly, the paper will spotlight and discuss some not-so-common manifestations of the child abuse phenomenon which are in many ways peculiar to the Nigerian (or African) socio-cultural environment. The data for this article were collected in the course of a study of child care and socialization patterns in Nigeria carried out by the author. The study entailed a nationwide sample survey of over 2000 parents chosen through a multi-stage, stratified sampling process. Conducted between May and October 1983, the survey used an interviewer-administered questionnaire. This study instrument consisted of seven sections, one of which was designed to elicit from respondents information on the existence, perception, forms and prevalence of child abuse in their respective communities.

EXISTENCE OF CHILD ABUSE

As earlier indicated, the first consideration is to ascertain what behaviour patterns are regarded as child abuse by Nigerians. To this end, respondents were asked whether the concept of "child maltreatment" or "child abuse" exists in their native language (vernacular) and, if so, what acts or behaviour patterns are regarded as child abuse in their home communities. All the respondents agree that the notion of child abuse does exist in their respective communities. According to them, each community has an inextricable convention or unwritten code as to what behaviour patterns (under given circumstances) constitute child abuse or maltreatment. These statements are further confirmed by the fact that all the various language groups in the study also have terms or words for child maltreatment in their native language.

FORMS OF CHILD ABUSE

With the existence of the notion of child abuse thus established, the study proceeded to ascertain what patterns of behaviour are considered as child abuse by Nigerians. Table 1 summarizes the data in this respect.
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>Affirmative response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Economic exploitation</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Starving or denial of food</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent or severe beatings</td>
<td>11.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General neglect</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excessive hard labour</td>
<td>9.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent bullying or nagging</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pawning and/or slavery</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (discrimination on account of birth, child marriage, no schooling, etc.)</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A wide variety of forms of child abuse are mentioned by the respondents. These include various types of economic exploitation, starving, beating, hard labour, child pawning, child marriage, discrimination on grounds of birth or family status, as well as nagging, general neglect and denial of educational opportunity. To facilitate consideration here, these forms of abuse may be divided into two broad categories, namely the common forms of child abuse which are found in most societies (for example, child beating, nagging and general neglect) and the not-so-common abuse forms which appear peculiar to certain socio-cultural groups (for example, pawning, slavery, discrimination and child marriage). Since it is not possible in a paper of this type to give exhaustive treatment to all the forms of child abuse mentioned by the respondents, the analyses and discussions in the sections which follow will centre mainly on the not-so-common forms of child abuse, that is particularly on those child abuse forms which show some distinctive Nigerian features.

Economic exploitation

Exploitation of the child for economic gain is perhaps the commonest form of child abuse in Nigeria. It is mentioned by 29 per cent of the respondents and it is reported in all the states and by all the major ethnic groups in the country.

A child is economically exploited when he is made to engage, on a regular basis, in productive or income-yielding activities in which the primary beneficiaries are members of another generation or class. In Nigeria, this form of exploitation occurs in diverse forms and guises and may be perpetuated by the parents, foster parents, guardians, master tradesmen and employers of labour.

Traditionally, child-rearing customs in Nigeria prescribe that the child should be assigned some domestic work or activity commensurate with his age, sex and physical ability. As part of the socialisation process, such activities are a source of pride, status and independence for the children, besides providing an important supplement to the incomes of poor families. However, in recent times, this has led to all sorts of economic exploitation by various categories of people. Positions in which children are most frequently exploited are as follows:

As servants

In many Nigerian homes today, particularly in the urban centres, children who are of
school age are being used as domestic servants, baby-sitters and child-minders. These children suffer a lot of physical, psychological and social abuse. They are ordered about and bullied not only by the mistress of the house, but also by their fellow children. No effort is spared to remind them that they belong to a different and inferior status. They are therefore freely punished and frequently banished for misdemeanours and minor mistakes, while the children of the master of the house get away with more serious offences. The servants do not mix freely with the master’s children. Their sitting place and eating place are in the kitchen. They come to the dining room only to lay the table, serve water, clear the dishes and tidy up the table. Even while in the kitchen, they must not talk or laugh loudly enough to be heard by the master or mistress.

The long-term psychological effects of serving status on the children concerned cannot be over-emphasised. Children in all cultures need parental love and care in their tender years in order to grow up harmoniously into normal adults. When a child receives abuse in place of love, he may begin to develop the idea that society is hostile to him and this, in turn, may lead him to develop anti-social behaviour.

As beggars

Another form in which economic exploitation of children occurs in Nigeria is using them as street beggars. Children may be exploited in this way by their parents, foster parents or Koranic teachers (‘Mallams’). Street begging is described by Erudos as the worst thing which could happen to any child. The Nigerian situation is portrayed in these words: ‘Children are seen standing or sitting under the sun and feeling the excruciating pain of hunger, while they beg for alms. Most people that live in the major cities of the country have at one time or the other had the experience of having their legs or hands held by such poor kids.”

These beggar children carry on their assignments obediently and religiously, day by day. At the end of each day, the proceeds are turned in to the parent or ‘Mallam’ in order to earn that day’s meal.

As hawkers

Further, parents and guardians in Nigeria frequently exploit children economically by employing them as hawkers and street traders. In the market places, in the motor parks and along busy streets, under the scorching heat of the sun, children are seen carrying baskets full of wares, shouting at the top of their voices to attract the attention of interested buyers.

For some of the children, hawking or street trading is a full-time occupation leaving no time for schooling. For others who attend school, hawking starts as soon as school is over and continues late into the night.

As bus conductors

A special group of exploited children which may be mentioned are those used as bus conductors, especially in Lagos, the capital of Nigeria. In an effort to win passengers, these children are made to jump off moving vehicles as bus stops are approached and begin singing songs with names of bus stops or the bus routes which they operate.

The accident risks and health hazards of such an occupation are, to say the least, quite enormous.

Starving or denial of food

Starving ranks second among the commonest types of child abuse prevalent in Nigeria. It is mentioned by 21.8 per cent of the respondents.

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Child beating is considered as abuse only when it fails to conform to the established norms of society.

Starving may occur in three different forms. It may be total denial of one or more meals of the day for one or more days. Secondly, it may entail giving the child such a small quanti-
ty of food that it leaves him perpetually hungry. Thirdly, the child may be fed on left-
over food and devoid of essential nutrients so that the child remains constantly mal-
nourished.

Starvation occurs most frequently among servants and foster children, rarely among
the "biological" children. It may be imposed as a form of punishment for some minor of-
fece, for example, or it may be adopted as a deliberate policy by a cruel mistress who
sees it as a way of trimming down household expenses.

Frequent or severe beating

Plith stresses the fact that there is nothing new about child beating: "The purposeful
beating of the young has for centuries found legitimacy in belief of its necessity for achiev-
ing disciplinary, educational or religious obedience.1" In both Roman Law and English
Common Law, parents and guardians were given limitless disciplinary powers over their
children. However, by the early 19th century, a series of reform movements sprang up
in Europe and America to champion the cause of abused children. These social forces,
according to Pithi, "give rise to the devout labelling of child beating" and pronounced
speedy enactment of legislation to combat child abuse.

In Nigeria, as in most other African countries, socialisation and child-rearing norms still
prevail and in fact enjoin the use of the cane as an instrument of correction. But, Ackley
rightly points out: "It is sometimes difficult for the angry parent (or guardian) to make
the somewhat ambiguous distinction between appropriate discipline and abuse.13 To
protect the child, the use of the cane is regulated by custom in many societies. Thus, among
the Ejagham of Nigeria, corporal punishment or child beating is considered abusive and therefore
customary objectionable if it has a malicious intent, if it becomes frequent or severe, if
it is severe, if bare fists or instruments other than the cane are used and if the cane is too
big or too heavy for the age and stature of the child.

Child beating, therefore, is considered as abuse only when it fails to conform to the estab-
lished norms of society. As a result, only 11.8 per cent of the respondents identify fre-
quent or severe beating as one of the consequent forms of child abuse in Nigeria.

Pawning

One of the rarest forms of child abuse to be found in Nigeria is child pawning.

Child pawning is the practice of giving a child as security for money borrowed or
services rendered. By this act, such a child is virtually stripped of all human dignity and
freedom. He is in many ways similar to a slave, the main difference being that whereas a
slave is in perpetual bondage, a pawn is redeemable whenever the parent is in a position
to pay his debts.

To ascertain the extent to which this practice is prevalent in Nigeria, respondents were
asked whether it is customarily permissible in their localities for parents to give out their
children as pawns. The relevant data are presented in Table 2.

Even though the proportions of respondents from various states who indicate that pawn-
ing is permissible differ slightly, in many cases, they are certainly greater than what could
have been expected. One may therefore feel justified in concluding that child pawning is
definitely known in most states of Nigeria.

One interesting aspect of this practice is that it is more prevalent in the southern than
in the northern part of the country. Thus, all of those states (Aniocha, Cross River, Oyo,

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Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Yes %</th>
<th>No %</th>
<th>Can't say %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anambra</td>
<td>46.0</td>
<td>41.2</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benue</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Borno</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>73.7</td>
<td>17.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cross River</td>
<td>25.0</td>
<td>75.0</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edo</td>
<td>8.8</td>
<td>88.4</td>
<td>2.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kano</td>
<td>7.9</td>
<td>82.5</td>
<td>9.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kwarar</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>94.3</td>
<td>1.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lagos</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>82.2</td>
<td>11.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ogun</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>83.4</td>
<td>8.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ondo</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>77.3</td>
<td>13.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oyo</td>
<td>37.6</td>
<td>50.9</td>
<td>11.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plateau</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>99.0</td>
<td>1.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rivers</td>
<td>34.2</td>
<td>65.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sokoto</td>
<td>5.1</td>
<td>89.9</td>
<td>9.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Bauchi, Borno, Gombe, Kaduna and Niger states, which have fewer than five cases on the whole, are omitted.

and River) in which 26 per cent or more of the respondents indicate that pawnship is allowed are in the south, while no northern state records more than 9 per cent positive response.

That a practice is permissible does not, by itself, indicate its currency or frequency of occurrence. To ascertain how current this practice still is, respondents were asked whether they know of any cases of child pawnship actually occurring in the last five years. In ten out of the nineteen states (Anambra, Benue, Borno, Kano, Kwarar, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Oyo and River), at least one person admits knowledge of pawnship occurring in the last five years. In Anambra, Borno and Benel state-s, as many as 5.3 per cent, 5.2 per cent and 4.2 per cent of the respondents respectively admit such knowledge.

Children are pawned frequently as security for money borrowed to pay for medical fees, to cover land dispute expenses, to raise capital for business or trade, to pay for other children's education, to pay a fine or levy... or even to undergo a customary rite.

Further inquiry into the phenomenon of child pawnship reveals that it is sex-biased in favour of males. That is to say that female-children are more likely to be given out as pawns than male children. This is understandable in view of the high valuation placed on male children in most Nigerian communities. In a number of cases, the pawn is turned into a wife or concubine of the creditor if she is not redeemed by the time she attains maturity.

Slavery and 'not-free-born':

Amogb the Igbo of Nigeria, there were traditionally two categories of slaves, namely, slaves of men ('OHub') and slaves of the gods ('Osoon'). As the 'Osoon' were slaves dedicated to certain deities, they were therefore excluded from any form of free association with the non-'Osoon', effectively becoming social outcasts.

Slavery in all forms was outlawed in Nigeria some decades ago. But, in some areas of the
country, descendants of slave families are still regarded as 'not-free-born' and are denied full citizenship status on that account. Children of these families generally suffer social discrimination and deprivation.

To determine the prevalence of this practice in Nigeria, respondents were asked whether there are instances known to them in which children of certain families are regarded as outcasts or not full citizens. 17 per cent of the study sample respond positively. 71 per cent deny knowledge of any such cases, while 12 per cent say that they are not sure. These figures vary widely from one ethnic group to another and from state to state. On a state basis, the proportion admitting knowledge of these practices ranges from 56.3 per cent in Aminra, 20.6 per cent in Benue, 19 per cent in Ondo, to lower than 5 per cent in Plateau and Bauchi. What can be deduced from this is that the practice, though still in existence, is not uniform throughout the country.

To obtain further insight into the nature of deprivation suffered by 'not-free-born', respondents were asked to mention what rights and privileges are customarily denied. The most frequently mentioned right denied 'not-free-born' is the right to own land. It is mentioned by 38.4 per cent of the respondents. The gravity of this act is better appreciated when it is realised that the discussion relates to an agrarian society in which land is the basis of livelihood. In such a society, denial of the right to land is tantamount to denial of the right to existence. Denial of the right to marry outside their caste into the free-born society is the second most frequently mentioned social handicap to which 'not-free-born' are subjected. It is mentioned by 27.4 per cent of the respondents. Other restrictions mentioned, though not as frequently, include denial of the right to take titles (16.5 per cent), denial of the right to address public meetings (7.3 per cent), denial of the right to undergo certain initiation rites (6.1 per cent) and denial of the right to chieftaincy (3 per cent).

Although it would appear that these denials of rights and privileges relate more specifically to adults than to children, the fact remains that children are equally adversely affected. For one thing, children inherit the social status of their families and, quite early in the socialisation process, children from such under-privileged families are made to realise their inferior social standing by their peers. Obviously, this has serious psychological consequences for the personality development of the children concerned. In addition, the adverse effects mentioned earlier in connection with 'amput' status, the affected children may acquire an inferiority complex, develop a withdrawal syndrome as a coping mechanism, become aggressive or develop other forms of delinquent behaviour.

**CONCLUSION**

In recent years, expressions of interest in and concern for children have become world-wide in scope. As a practical demonstration of this global concern, the United Nations Organisation declared 1970 International Year of the Child, with the main purpose of focusing the attention of various peoples and Governments of the world on the special needs and circumstances of children. In pursuance of this same goal, the United Nations Children's Fund advises: "Each country, whether or not fully equipped with data and planning machinery, should develop a national policy for its children and youth which should contain a statement of the major problems facing the younger generation."

Nigeria, as yet, has no national policy on children and the data presented above is a good testimony that the country is in dire need of one. A sound national policy on children must be grounded on thorough knowledge of both the general and particular problems of children in that country. The present paper has focused on the issue of child abuse or maltreatment.
The introduction of a compulsory free primary education scheme in Nigeria is urgently recommended

Although the paper does not provide an exhaustive list of what acts constitute child abuse, it has endeavoured to present empirical information on how Nigerians perceive child abuse, the various forms which it takes and certain aspects of this phenomenon which are peculiar to Nigeria.

The eradication of some of the aspects of child abuse discussed above will require fundamental modifications in Nigeria's social and economic structure, belief systems and value orientations. The correction of some others is likely to require legislative provisions coupled with appropriate administrative action.

However, there is one governmental action which should be taken now, which should prove both feasible and popular, while paving the way for the success of other long-term measures. This action is the introduction of a compulsory free primary education scheme in Nigeria. This measure, if enforced, will drastically reduce the number of children being exploited as full-time domestic servants, street beggars, shop boys, bus conductors and the like, will have a liberating effect on children being used as pawns and will provide new opportunities for social interaction to the 'hot-free-born'.

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