



University of Nigeria

Virtual Library

Serial No	
Author 1	OBIKEZE, D. S. C.
Author 2	
Author 3	
Title	Perspectives on Child Abuse in Nigeria
Keywords	
Description	Perspectives on Child Abuse in Nigeria
Category	Social Sciences
Publisher	International Child Welfare Review Contents
Publication Date	December, 1984
Signature	

international child welfare review

contents

DECEMBER 1984 - No. 63

Cover photo : UNHCR/J. Jessen-Petersen
Young Ethiopian refugee

EDITORIAL	2
WORLDWIDE	5
Three months of developments in the social field	
INTERNATIONAL MEETINGS	19
Principal International meetings on the subject of children and youth	
THROUGH THE GRAPEVINE	24
Information we are asked to pass on...	
PERSPECTIVES ON CHILD ABUSE IN NIGERIA	25
by D. S. Obikeze	
WHAT PURPOSE IS SERVED BY CHILD DAY CARE POLICY IN THE UNITED STATES ?	33
by Angela Christine Browne	
INTERNATIONAL NEWS	
The Friends of Youth World Association (<i>AMADE</i>)	44
The International Association of Juvenile and Family Court Magistrates (<i>IJFCM</i>)	47
The International Association of Workers for Maladjusted Children (<i>IAWMC</i>)	52
The International Federation for Parent Education (<i>IFPE</i>)	54
The World Movement of Mothers (<i>WMM</i>)	57
IUCW Column	59

The International Child Welfare Review is published quarterly with a supplement 'BIBLIOTHEQUE/LIBRARY/BIBLIOTECA'. Articles published in it remain the entire responsibility of their authors. The editors cannot be held responsible for manuscripts submitted.
Reproduction authorized subject to permission from the publisher.

© Copyright 1984

International Child Welfare Review (IUCW)
ISSN Number : 0020-6342. - From 1975 onwards,
the Review is available in microform. Details from :
University Microfilms International
Article Reprint Service
300 North Zeeb Road - Ann Arbor,
Michigan 48106 - USA

PERSPECTIVES ON CHILD ABUSE IN NIGERIA

D.S. Obikeze

A citizen of Nigeria, Dr. D. S. Obikeze was born in 1939. He was educated at the University of Nigeria and at Loyola University of Chicago. Currently Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology/Anthropology at the University of Nigeria, he has carried out a number of empirical studies on the rehabilitation of war-displaced children in Nigeria, situation and care of the elderly, population aging, education and the extended family norms. Married with four children, Dr. Obikeze is the author of two books and many journal articles.

Despite universal expressions of good will and concern for the young, children in most societies are subjected to various forms of abuse on account of their dependency status. Child abuse forms differ according to societal norms, values and customs. This article provides empirical evidence of what Nigerians regard as child abuse, assesses prevalence, highlights abuse forms considered peculiar to the Nigerian socio-cultural environment and, finally, recommends measures to eradicate them.

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-instinctive 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,¹ the Igbo (also known as Ibo) say 'Nwa ka aku', 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 contradictions² 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 partly explains the 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 Gusii-Nyansongo 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

lowly position, children are ordered about like servants and punished freely.³ Uchendu also reports that among the Igbo of Nigeria, it was customary not to serve children frequent 'doses' of meat so that they did not grow up to become wasteful or lustful after meat.⁴ 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.⁵

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 so much prominence in current Western literature on this subject that the impression is inadvertently given that child abuse is merely synonymous with child beating or 'battering'. Perhaps it is the realisation 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 which 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 socialisation 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 '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 ascertainable 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 area 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 summarises the data in this respect.

**Exploitation of the child for economic gain
is perhaps the commonest form of child abuse in Nigeria**

Table 1

Types of behaviour regarded as child abuse by Nigerians

Behaviour	Affirmative response
Economic exploitation	29.0 %/o
Starving or denial of food	21.8 %/o
Frequent or severe beating	11.8 %/o
General neglect	9.7 %/o
Excessive hard labour	5.9 %/o
Frequent bullying or nagging	5.6 %/o
Pawning and/or slavery	4.8 %/o
Other (discrimination on account of birth, child marriage, no schooling, etc.)	2.9 %/o
Don't know	8.5 %/o

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.⁷ In Nigeria, this form of exploitation occurs in diverse forms and guises and may be perpetrated 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.⁸ 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

**When a child receives abuse in place of love,
he may begin to develop the idea that society is hostile to him**

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 beaten 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 servant 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 Eraedu 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.'⁹

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 need to 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 sing-songs with names of bus stops or the bus routes which they operate.¹⁰

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.

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 quantity of food that it leaves him perpetually hungry. Thirdly, the child may be fed on left-over food and chaff devoid of essential nutrients so that the child remains constantly malnourished.

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 offence, for example, or it may be adopted as a deliberate policy by a callous mistress who sees it as a way of trimming down household expenses.

Frequent or severe beating

Pfohl 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 achieving disciplinary, educational or religious obedience.'¹¹ 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 Pfohl, 'gave rise to the deviant labelling of child beating'¹² and promoted speedy enactment of legislation to combat child abuse.

In Nigeria, as in most other African countries, socialisation and child-rearing norms still permit 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 Igbo of Nigeria, corporal punishment or child beating is considered abusive and therefore customarily objectionable if it has a malicious intent, if it becomes a frequent occurrence, 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 established norms of society. As a result, only 11.8 per cent of the respondents identify frequent or severe beating as one of the commonest forms of child abuse in Nigeria.

Pawning

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

Child pawning is the practice of giving out 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 pawner 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 provided in table 2.

Even though the proportions of respondents from various states who indicate that pawning is permissible appear small, 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 parts of the country. Thus, all of those states (Anambra, Cross River, Oyo

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

Table 2

*Whether pawning is customarily permissible in Nigerian states **

State	Yes	No	Can't say
Anambra	46.0 %/o	41.2 %/o	12.8 %/o
Bendel	8.8 %/o	88.4 %/o	2.8 %/o
Borno	8.8 %/o	73.7 %/o	17.5 %/o
Cross River	25.0 %/o	75.0 %/o	—
Imo	8.0 %/o	88.0 %/o	4.0 %/o
Kano	7.9 %/o	82.5 %/o	9.6 %/o
Kwara	4.1 %/o	94.3 %/o	1.6 %/o
Lagos	5.9 %/o	82.2 %/o	11.9 %/o
Ogun	8.3 %/o	83.4 %/o	8.3 %/o
Ondo	9.1 %/o	77.3 %/o	13.6 %/o
Oyo	37.6 %/o	50.9 %/o	11.5 %/o
Plateau	—	99.0 %/o	1.0 %/o
Rivers	34.2 %/o	65.2 %/o	0.6 %/o
Sokoto	5.1 %/o	85.9 %/o	9.0 %/o

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

and Rivers) in which 25 per cent or more of the respondents indicate that pawning is allowed are in the south, while no northern state records more than a 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 pawning actually occurring in the last five years. In ten out of the nineteen states (Anambra, Bendel, Borno, Kano, Kwara, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Oyo and Rivers), at least one person admits knowledge of pawning occurring in the last five years. In Anambra, Borno and Bendel states, 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 enquiry into the phenomenon of child pawning 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-borns'

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

Slavery in all forms was outlawed in Nigeria some decades ago. But, in some areas of the

Descendants of slave families are still regarded as 'not-free-borns' and are denied full citizenship status on that account

country, descendants of slave families are still regarded as 'not-free-borns' 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 Anambra, 20.6 per cent in Bendel, 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-borns', respondents were asked to mention what rights and privileges are customarily denied. The most frequently mentioned right denied 'not-free-borns' 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-borns' 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 to the adverse effects mentioned earlier in connection with servant 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 1979 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.'¹⁴

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 'not-free-borns'.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

- 1 AKIWOWO, A.A. Child Welfare and Development Planning. Geneva, IUCW, 1973; p. 20. (National Seminar on 'The Importance of Child Welfare in Development Planning' held at the Catering Rest House, Jos, Nigeria, 9-13 April 1973).
- 2 CANTWELL, Nigel. Parental Physical Violence towards Children. In : ASSIGNMENT Children. Geneva, 1979, vol. 47/48; pp. 126-140.
- 3 ROBERT, A., LEVINE, B. Nyansongo, a Gusii Community in Kenya. In : WHITING, B. Six Cultures. New York, John Wiley, 1963; p. 151.
- 4 UCHENDU, V.C. The Igbo of South-Eastern Nigeria. New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1965; p. 61.
- 5 CANTWELL, Nigel. [op. cit.]; p. 135.
- 6 Ibid., p. 133.
- 7 RODGERS, G., STANDING, G. (eds). Child Work, Poverty and Under-Development. Reviewed in : POPULATION, 1982, vol. 8, No. 7.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 ERAEDU, Oguqua. The Nigerian Child : a Victim of Exploitation. In : SUNDAY Times. London, 14.11.82; p. 22.
- 10 Ibid., p. 22.
- 11 PFOHL, S.J. The Discovery of Child Abuse. In : SOCIAL Problems. Boston, 1977, vol. 24, No. 3; p. 310.
- 12 Ibid., p. 310.
- 13 ACKLEY, Dona C. A Brief Overview of Child Abuse. In : SOCIAL Casework. 1977, vol. 58, No. 1; p. 21.
- 14 MOSER, A. Introductory Report. Geneva, IUCW, 1973; p. 4. (National Seminar on 'The Importance of Child Welfare in Development Planning' held at the Catering Rest House, Jos, Nigeria, 9-13 April 1973).