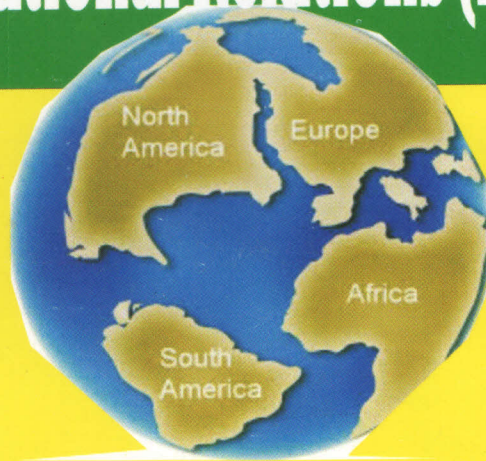




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All correspondence and contributions should be addressed to:

Prof. AOY Raji

Editor-in-Chief,

Al-Hikmah Journal of History and International Relations,

Faculty of the Humanities & Social Sciences,

Al-Hikmah University,

P.M.B. 1601,

Ilorin, Nigeria.

GSM: 08067990090

Email: dradeyusufraj@yahoo.com

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Prof. AOY Raji

Editor-in-Chief,

Al-Hikmah Journal of History and International Relations,

Faculty of the Humanities & Social Sciences,

Al-Hikmah University,

P.M.B. 1601,

Ilorin, Nigeria.

GSM: 08067990090

Email: dradeyusufraj@yahoo.com

Dr. TS Abejide

Managing Editor,

Al-Hikmah Journal of History and International Relations,

Faculty of the Humanities & Social Sciences,

Al-Hikmah University,

P.M.B. 1601,

Ilorin, Nigeria.

GSM: 08139514787

Email: tayesayo4@gmail.com

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**CHILD ABUSE: THREAT TO NATION BUILDING IN THE
EASTERN NIGER DELTA, NIGERIA C. 1999-2017**

Odeigah, Theresa Nfam, Ph.D.

Department of History and International Studies, Faculty of Arts,
University of Ilorin, P.M.B 1515, Ilorin, Kwara State

todeigah@yahoo.com

+2348038042036, +2348054292977

Abstract

The problem of child maltreatment has remained with us for a long time for cultural and several other reasons. This serious social menace has recently gained some recognition and attention in the Eastern Niger Delta area of Nigeria, due to increasing awareness and education among the populace created by some non-governmental agencies. These acts of neglect, exploitation, physical, sexual abuse, psychological and emotional abuse have negatively affected the children. All these negative effects leading to mal adaptation have eventually led some of the children into criminal activities, unplanned pregnancies, robbery, illicit drugs use and violence. The study adopts both primary and secondary sources. It examined child abuse as an impediment to nation building in the Eastern Niger Delta area of Nigeria using a historic-structural and multi-disciplinary approaches. The study concludes that poor parenting, poverty, unemployment, maternal depression, unintended conception, large family size, weak institutions such as the Nigeria police force, National Agency for the prohibition of Trafficking in Persons among others, remain major reasons for child maltreatment in the area and are therefore, impediments to nation building. There is therefore an urgent need for government to re-direct its policy on child protection in order to curb the menace in Niger Delta. It is only then that socio-economic development of the people would be guaranteed.

Keywords: Child, Abuse, Threat, Nation, Building, Niger Delta

Introduction

The issue of child abuse in the Eastern Niger Delta area has become common and very worrisome. Child abuse can be seen as an action by another person that causes significant harm to a child. Child abuse could also be physical, social, psychological, emotional or sexual exploitation of the child. Neglect in whatever form, against the child can be damaging. In 2012, a global survey by the Economist Intelligence Unit showed that Nigeria is among the countries with the highest cases of child abuse in the world¹.

In the Eastern Niger Delta, the conditions being faced by children of different age groups are not the best for their proper up-bringing. Some children are being taken away as housemaids, sales girls, sex slaves, and as baby sitters. In some parts of Cross River State and Akwa Ibom State, children roam round the streets as homeless children and sleep in uncompleted buildings. In one of the Punch News Paper editions, it was reported that a nine year old boy was found by security operatives with chins on his legs in one of the churches in Calabar and it was alleged that the boy's father instructed the church to do so. Children are said to be the future leaders of our country, the question is how then, can children become the leaders of tomorrow with the scourge of constant child abuse rampant in the area². It is noted that since nation building is an important part of any society, children should be given good education and their well-being should be a priority to any government³.

Nation building has to do with the political, economic, cultural and social development of any society based on concerted efforts by all and sundry in the country. Every society has important and fundamental roles to play in the lives of children for the future development and sustenance of the country. In the Eastern Niger Delta, children are faced with enormous challenges, among which is child maltreatment and abuse. This menace has remained in the area for a long time because of cultural and several other reasons. Some of these challenges are being posed by the parents, mentors, relatives, friends, poverty and the society at large. Child abuse is a social problem that has also exposed the children to criminal activities such as cigarettes smoking and other vices. In the Eastern Niger Delta area, child abuse has not been given the attention it deserves, until recently when an organization known as the African Network for Prevention Against Child Abuse and Neglect began to create awareness and educate the people on this problem. The organization has also encouraged other none-governmental agencies to come into the area to rescue the affected children⁴.

Causes of Child Abuse in the Eastern Niger Delta

Every child has his or her differences, uniqueness and genetic endowments as well. A combination of factors has also caused difficulties and challenges in meeting the responsibility of parenthood. Some of these factors include poverty, economic recession, illiteracy, violent insecurity and early marriage among others.⁵ There are some other causes of child abuse,

such as child labour in our society and operation of so called illegal baby factories where children are sold in corrupt transactions for money.



Fig.1 Skolombo Epidemic: How Calabar Children Labelled Witches Turn into Stress gangsters, punchng.com, 2016

These children have turned to stress boys causing violence and criminal activities in the area. It is noted that child abuse is more common among the girl child than the boy. It could also result from lack of parenting knowledge and skills, mental health problems of parents, stress, depression, emotional problems and immaturity of parents. When the early signs of child abuse are missed due to lack of awareness by the parents, it results in tremendous suffering for the child⁶.

Poverty: One of the major causes of child abuse is widespread poverty and unemployment. In the Eastern Niger delta area, most of the families are poor as a result of the destruction of the ecosystem and traditional agriculture practice. Some of their sources of income such as fishing are affected negatively as a result of recurrent oil spillage. Most families find it difficult to go into farm because of the difficult terrain. Some parents have failed to provide the basic needs of their children, such as shelter, clothing, education,

food and supervision among other necessities of the child. This most times causes emotional and physical stress for the child resulting in emotional trauma which could be associated with disruption in the early brain development and maturation. The level of poverty and economic problems in Nigeria has forced a lot of children into the labour market, where they do a lot of hawking to help their parents to pay their bills in their homes. It is pertinent to note that this exposes especially the girl to sexual abuse and physical assault⁷.

Bereavement: Death is also one of the causes of child abuse in the Eastern Niger Delta area of Nigeria. Many of the children that their parents have died, become orphans, and would have to be catered for by the extended family relations who may not be able to afford sending them to school. Most of the children are left in the care of their uncles, relations or grandparents, who lack the capability to care for them. Most of these children are sent to the streets to hawk goods which exposed them to sexual harassment, kidnap, poor feeding, and maltreatment by the general public. Clearly, these children eventually do not get to acquire proper education, and upbringing.

Child Labour: Child labour is the employment of children under the age of 18 years. The increase in population has forced many parents to engage in child labour⁸ Child labour is also one of the traditional means of socialisation among the children, because a child moves from one place to the other interacting socially and also selling their goods. The introduction of a young girl or boy into street trading either in the village or a town increases the vulnerability of the child to sexual harassment and other vices. Most of the children leave home and their parents to long distant places to sell their goods without any monitoring. This gives the child the opportunity to engage and learn some social vices in the eastern Delta. Street hawking encourages sexual abuse and most of these children are victims, because of lack of monitoring by the parents and they also have free access to watching pornographic videos and money⁹.

Child trafficking: trafficking of children for the purpose of domestic service, prostitution and different form of exploitative labour is one of the lucrative businesses in the area. In the whole world, child trafficking is one of the fastest growing criminal activities. In some part of the Eastern Niger Delta having a child out of wedlock is seen as a taboo and it constitute shame to the family, when this child is born, most times is treated like an unwanted child. Most parents in this category give out these children for domestic

services. This practice has become a widespread phenomenon in the area and this is one of the factors why children failed to develop optimally. In Akwa-Ibom and Cross River States are places where private transit camps for trafficked children have been reported, and from there they are transported to other countries outside the shores of Nigeria into forced labour and prostitution. Some of the reasons for child trafficking therefore include, over population, poverty, urbanization, unemployment, low level of literacy and parental death. Most families because of poverty and their economic situation are over-burdened with the care of large families and prone to giving out their children as house maids thereby reducing the child's prospects of developing and acquiring education and other skills¹⁰.

Illegal Baby Factories: this has become common in Nigeria and especially in the Eastern part of Nigeria as well as the Eastern Niger Delta. In their illegal Baby Factories unsuspecting young girls are offered large sums of money for the purpose of having children. They are then gotten pregnant by men who are also on the pay roll of the owners of the factory. At delivery the babies are taken from them and sold to families who are unable to have children and some of the children also end up outside the shores of Nigeria and could be prone to emotional and sexual abuse¹¹.

Violence: violence has threatened the peace and stability of the Eastern Niger Delta area. Violence and civil disobedience is common in the Eastern Niger Delta area. This could take the form of clashes between political opponents or political parties. Young people are usually the ones recruited by politicians to perpetrate violence and mayhem. The Niger Delta Avengers (NDV) also contributed to the instability in the area through pipeline vandalism and disruption of power lines in the area. The children and women are the most affected by the resulting insecurity and criminality. Some parents or relatives in error punished their children by starving them; this can lead a child to rebel and run away from the house and eventually joining a criminal gang¹².

Child abandonment: a combination of several factors can result in the child being abandoned. These include; poverty, illiteracy, unplanned pregnancies, lack of family planning, gender of the child and mental sub-normality conditions in the child. This results in the child being abandoned and exposed to dangerous living conditions¹³. Most children involved are new born babies and those under the age of six months. Most times these children are abandoned in pit toilets, rubbish bins, markets and public places where the

children can easily be seen and picked up for care by public spirited individuals.

Early Marriage: Early marriage has also put a lot of children at risk of abuse. Early marriage is defined as a marriage or union entered into by an individual before reaching the age of 18 years¹⁴. Because they are not psychologically matured for marriage, they tend to have difficulties of child rearing and therefore are prone to child abuse and abandonment. Early marriage is viewed as a violation of human right and is most time prohibited by law or some organisations¹⁵

Substance Abuse: substance abuse is also known as drug abuse. This is a patterned an individual use or consumes in a harmful manner. Most times criminal or some anti-social behaviour occurs, when an individual is under the influence of drugs¹⁶. This is also a major problem in the society today. Alcohol, drugs and other illicit substances have also contributed to child abuse when they are raised by addicted parents. Some young people are in the habit of taking drugs and this is dangerous to their physical and mental health. This is more so since some parents also abused illicit drugs and alcohol ¹⁷1. This can also affect the brain, especially the brain that is still developing, causing `long time problems with cognitive and academic impairment. Alcohol is generally harmful to body and even affect the social behaviour of individual and also aid in violence¹⁷.

The Consequences of Child Abuse on Nation Building

The present socio-economic situation in the country especially the economic recession has brought child abuse into prominence. One of the major causes of child abuse is criminality and child abuse also eventually increases criminal tendencies among abused children. Some of these children are living on the streets, taking care of their responsibilities without the assistance of their parents or relations. For example, in Calabar, they have a group of children known as Skolombo boys and Lakakasara. This is a gang of destitute street boys and girls roaming the streets of Calabar and its environs. The children are not in contact with their parents or relatives. They live in abandoned buildings on the streets. This has been a major security threat in the area, because they snatch people's bags and property. Most of these children have taken to criminal activities and are also involved in political violence¹⁸.

Physical abuse: physical abuse comes in different dimensions, it could come in the form of physical affliction by parents or relatives, through beating, hitting, slapping, kicking, punching and use of physical force. All these could cause harm or result in permanent marks on the body of the child. Physical abuse occurs as a result of provocation, anxiety, stress and anger. World Health Organisation defines physical abuse as intentional use of physical force against a child that results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in harm for a child's health, survival, dignity and development among others. This includes, beating, suffocating, punishing, strangling, hitting and poisoning. Physical violence against a child can inflict a child with various types of mental illness¹⁹.

Reduction of Students performance: child abuse has affected a lot of students in school especially during class work and examination. The alarming poor student's performance is as a result of either physical, emotional or poverty from either the parents or the teachers. This has affected poor academic performances among students²⁰.

Psychological abuse or emotional abuse: Child abuse increases the risk of the child smoking, not going to school, or being neglected. This is a common phenomenon among the children, and it occurs without the knowledge of parents. Most of the children go through psychological or emotional torment. Most parents, teachers and relatives abuse or call offensive names without minding how the children feel or how it affects them emotionally. This has led a lot of children into wrong companies with a lot of harm being done to them.²¹

Sexual Abuse: child abuse is also a form of abuse in which an adult abuses a child sexually. Sexual abuse has devastating effects on the female child especially, because the risk of the girl child being sexually abused is high in most schools and homes. There is also sexual abuse of children involved in child labour. This assault could occur inside uncompleted buildings, lonely places and lonely houses²². Child sexual abuse is difficult to detect by parents, because there may be no signs and the child may be afraid to disclose the issue, and so they suffer emotional torment. Children are used by people with sexual perversion and this includes rape. The danger in sexual abuse includes unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infection such as HIV and other bacterial sexually transmitted infections.²³

Child Labour: This is a common practice in Niger Delta area, and it is one of the ways of socialisation for the children. Children trading or hawking

goods for their parents or relatives on the streets are exposed to sexual abuse.²⁴ Most children, because of poverty, hawking is a means of survival for the family to meet the basic needs of life. Some children after school hours go into the streets sell and hawk goods. Street hawking increases the vulnerability of the girl child to sexual harassment.²⁵ For example, human trafficking is a common and lucrative business in Cross River. NAPTIP (National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons) has shown that Akwa-Ibom and Cross River states have one of the highest rates of child trafficking. Most time human trafficking is either by force or deception. This form of exploitation affects a child negatively.²⁶

Conclusion

Child abuse is a social vice that is prevalent in our society and is a common phenomenon in the Eastern Niger Delta area. Child abuse could be sexual, physical or psychological. The factors leading to child abuse could be violence, child trafficking and early marriage among others. Child abuse can hinder nation building in any given society. Because children are the future leaders and children that are abused cannot develop optimally to make meaningful contribution to society. Human trafficking and child abuse are very closely linked. As a way forward, the Ministry of Women Affairs at the Federal level and State Ministries of Youth and Social welfare as well as the Nigerian Police Force, National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons as well as the Interpol, all have major roles to play in curbing this menace in the society.

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