

**AN EXPLORATION OF CHILD HAWKING IN MAJOR  
CITIES IN NIGERIA**

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**ABSTRACT:** The prevalence of child hawking is the most pervasive violation of children's rights in many African countries, particularly in Nigeria. It is a practice that abuses the rights and privileges of the child. Hawking exposes a child to many dangers. This paper explored child hawking in major cities in Nigeria. This theoretical study revealed that illiteracy, poverty, broken homes, unemployment and the death of parents are factors contributing to the menace of child hawking in Nigeria. The paper revealed that hawking poses serious health challenges to a child, with the risk of being sexually molested, in addition to affecting his/her educational development. The authors concluded that more advice should be given on the danger of hawking. Parents should be supported by developing alternative income streams to reduce reliance on child hawking. The paper further recommended genuine empowerment of families through cash transfers and other social security initiatives that can strengthen the finances of parents. The paper further recommended that the government address the problem of poverty, especially in rural areas.

**Keywords:** Children, Child Hawking, Child Rights, Health Challenge, Poverty

## **INTRODUCTION**

The phenomenon of child hawking in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, has been a growing concern for years. It is a practice that abuses the rights and privileges of children in countries where it is prevalent (Azonuche, 2020). Globally, it is estimated that the number of child hawks rose to over 160 million children—63 million girls and 97 million boys—at the beginning of 2020 (ILO & UNICEF, 2021). According to Ijadunola, Ojo, Adelekan and Olatunji (2014), child hawking is a form of child abuse similar to child trafficking, arms begging, prostitution, domestic house help, the employment of underage, etc. The International Labour Organization (2009) cited in Azonuche (2020) defines child hawking as the use of children within school age for trading activities.

The scourge of child hawking is pervasive in Africa, particularly Nigeria, where over 22 million children under 15 years of age are reported to be engaged in hawking (UNICEF, 2017). According to Azonuche (2020), several studies (UNICEF, 2012; Nduka & Duru, 2014; Ijadunola et al., 2014) have shown that vending/hawking practices are most common in Nigeria. Additionally, a 2003 International Labour Organization (ILO) survey of street hawking in Nigeria, identified eight causative factors: unemployment, single parents, low education, economic problems, cultural influence, national debt, street life and illiteracy (Oruwari, 1996). Hawking is a very old practice in Nigeria. It involves sales of goods/commodities by going from one location to another, from one house to one home, from one neighbourhood to one neighbourhood and along major roads, among other locations

(Azonuche, 2020). It is a system of trading whereby the trader moves his/her wares about without being restricted to a particular location.

There is no generally accepted definition for the term ‘child hawking’. Alaye (2021) refers to street hawking ‘wandering like movement’ in which an individual carries his/her goods with a tray on his/her head or shoulder or by other means of transportation, such as wheelbarrow, bicycle or trolley, in search of a potential buyer. Child hawking has become a social menace in Nigeria. Similarly, Ijadunola et al. (2014) observed child hawking as a form of street trading involving underage children who move from one place to another in search of potential buyers. Child hawking may have negative effects on children, such as potential safety and other traffic hazards for hawkers and other road users. Child labour under which hawking is subsumed has been a difficult issue to examine owing to its multifaceted dimensions. The practice of hawking has been an economic lifeline for many people at the bottom of the economic pyramid in developing countries (Lanre, 2017). According to the National Bureau of Statistics (NBS, 2015), the vulnerable poor population is part of Nigeria’s informal sector, which comprises 58.82% of Nigeria’s 2015 gross domestic product (GDP). These people mostly uneducated, unskilled and poor eke out their living through hawking (Lanre, 2017). In traditional African societies, children play an important role in family support. The cultural aspect of having children apart from continuing the family lineage is helping support the family. This support has various dimensions, including helping farmlands, running errands, hawking to support family income, etc. Ibrahim, Talib, Paim and Gill (2015) argue that the concept of child hawking has become an issue of repeated controversy due to its magnitude and exploitation. The cultural aspect of children helping their parents hawk in African societies has not necessarily translated to children being exploited or abused. It is a practice of training children to be self-financially independent and equip them with the ability to navigate their adult life in terms of financial experience. This contrasts sharply with the Western understanding of the concept.

The reality of child hawking in Africa is quite different from the prism of European scholars. It is not an abuse of children’s rights in its entirety, as Oli (2018) and Magayi and Sarka (2020) observed that young people often hawk not because of poverty but for excitement and the need for pocket money. Today, in all major cities in Nigeria, children between the ages of 6 and 17 years who are supposed to be in school are seen hawking one thing or the other. Addressing these complex challenges of child hawking requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses an understanding of the underlying factors contributing to child hawking and its consequences.

In Africa, particularly Nigeria, child hawking has been influenced by various community norms and social expectations which were not previously covered in existing literature. In many communities, economic necessity has pushed children into hawking as a necessary means of survival due to poverty and lack of alternative income sources. Similarly, hawking is often viewed as a normal part of childhood and a way for children to contribute to the family income (Ibrahim *et al.*, 2015). According to Magayi and Sarka (2020) hawking serves as a socialisation and learning process for children to learn important abilities, such as entrepreneurship and responsibilities. Many communities in Nigeria have different norms around what is considered appropriate work for children. Hawking, especially after school hours is viewed as acceptable. Addressing the complex challenges of child hawking requires a multifaceted approach that encompasses an understanding of the cultural and social norms contributing to the phenomenon. This is the perspective the paper aims to provide.

## **METHODS AND MATERIALS**

This is a theoretical paper that used current and recognized literature related to child hawking. The literature explains the factors influencing child hawking and types of child hawking and highlights the consequences of child hawking for children (Uche, 2024; Obuzor & Gabriel-Job, 2022; Adedayo et al., 2021; Oyewale, 2018). The literature used for the study served as evidence used to guarantee that a good background has been presented in terms of the focus topic and that the knowledge gap has been highlighted properly to show the importance of the subject matter (Oli, 2018; Jibril et al., 2022). The literature comprises primary research, articles, newspapers, relevant books and conceptual definitions of child hawking. The terms used in the main searches are child hawking, factors predisposing children to hawking, the prevalence of child hawking and the effects of child hawking on children.

### **Empirical evidence**

A study by Uche (2024) examined the impact of street hawking on children's academic well-being and reported that children who engage in street hawking while attending school often struggle with tardiness and may develop academic immaturities, including poor study habits, a lack of skills, low self-esteem, and overall low performance in class. Additionally, a qualitative study by Obuzor and Gabriel-Job (2022) on street hawking among children as a form of child abuse was often overlooked and revealed that street hawking is common in Nigeria despite its adverse effects on children. Similarly, Adedayo, Sennuga, Sokoya, Samson and Sennuga (2021) conducted a study on underage labour in Nigeria with a specific focus on street hawkers in the Kosofe Local Government of Lagos State and reported that there is a significant relationship between poor parental economic background and involvement in street hawking. Oli (2018) reported that despite several attempts by the government to curb high rates of street hawking in Nigeria, this practice persists in most urban areas in the country. Oyewale (2018) conducted a study on social-cultural factors as determinants of street hawking and its effects on Oyo Township children of Oyo State, Nigeria. He found abundant evidence of street hawking by young children between the ages of 6 and 18 years in the study area running after moving vehicle selling wares and goods such as sachet water, plastics soft drinks, bottled water, bread, etc., negating the International Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Ago (2014) investigated the relationship between street hawking and the academic achievement of girl-child education in the government junior day secondary school of Yobe State, Nigeria. The findings of the study revealed that hawking affects the educational development of the girl child, whereas the socioeconomic status of parents contributes to girl child street hawking. The study highlights that societal norms do not promote street hawking. In a quantitative study by Taiwo (2023) on the intra-urban distribution of child hawking in southeast China, Nigeria explored it through questionnaires. Research has revealed that there is a relationship between child hawking and land use activities. The study highlighted that core residential areas and market land uses were generators of child hawking. Oyeleke, Eboraka and Okocha (2021) critically examined street hawking among children in the Mushin local government area of Lagos state. Their findings revealed that the frequency of parental conflict, single parenting, child fostering and mother hawking were significantly related to child street hawking. Adamu, Danjuma and Abasido (2021) investigated street hawking as a predictor of enrolment, attendance and retention of basic education students in Gusau, Zamfara State, Nigeria. The findings of the revealed that street hawking has a significant influence on enrolment, attendance and retention of basic education students in Zamfara State. The study

concluded that increase in the rate of school drop out in the state which has led to the increase in the rate of crime was as a result of government inability to address the problem of hawking. Similarly, Lekwa and Anyaogu (2016) investigated economic recession, hawking and student drop out of school in the five Eastern States of Nigeria. The study revealed that economic recession negatively affects school enrolment and has pulled many students out of school into the street to hawk.

Ngozi, Nwokike and Udom (2024) examined the prevalence of street hawking in Akwa Ibom State, assessing the effect on child education and remedial measures. Their findings revealed that issue of street hawking among underage children is prevalent and has adversely affected child education in Akwa Ibom State.

Eboh (2018) investigated the perceived effects of street hawking on the well-being of children in Anyigba, Dekina local government area of Kogi State, Nigeria. The findings of the study revealed that hawking has significant social implications and physical consequences on children's moral behaviour as well as health status. Additionally, Busari (2016) conducted a study on emotional distress as a resultant effect of street hawking and sexual abuse of female children in Oyo State, Nigeria and reported that socioeconomic status of parents was a determinant of sexual abuse among female children's hawkers. The study highlights that the educational background of parents plays a determinant factor on sexual abuse among female children's hawkers in the state.

## **Theoretical Framework**

### **General Strain Theory (GST)**

The study is anchored on the general strain theory of Agnew (1992). The general strain theory of Agnew focuses on the causes of crime/delinquency by expanding Merton's idea of strain by asserting that the causes of strain do not solely derive from societal pressure to achieve success. The theory posits that crime and delinquency are caused by the presence of negative emotion(s), such as fear, disappointment, depression, anger and frustration, resulting from an array of strains. According to Agnew, these negative feelings, in turn, lead to a need to cope with one potential coping mechanism: crime and/or delinquency. General strain theory (GST) proposes three types of strain: the inability to achieve positively valued goals (goal blocking), the removal of (or threat to remove), and the removal of (or threat to present) noxious stimuli. Agnew posits that various forms of strain, such as anger, depression and fear, cause individuals to experience negative emotional states (Agnew, 1992). According to the theory, crime/delinquency/occurs when people seek criminal means to cope with their negative emotions. Unemployment, as a form of negative emotion, weakens an individual's stake in conformity. Applied to the purpose of the study, the adoption of strain due to variations in coping mechanisms to crime/delinquency encouraged people to commit crimes/deviants. The presence of negative emotions such as frustration from the inability of parents to achieve positively valued goals (employment) influences them to engage their children in street hawking as a means of delinquency to cope with their negative emotions (unemployment). This theory, thus, best explains the phenomenon of child hawking in contemporary Nigerian society.

## Conceptual Clarification of Child Hawking

### Child Hawking

Sarka (2020) hawking serves as a socialization and learning process for children to learn important abilities, such as entrepreneurship and responsibility. Many communities in Nigeria have different norms around what is considered appropriate work for children. Hawking, especially after school hours is viewed as acceptable. Addressing the complex challenges of child hawking require a multifaceted approach that encompasses an understanding of the cultural and social norms contributing to the phenomenon. This is the perspective the paper aims to provide

Child hawking, as used in the study, refers to children below the age of 18 years who engage in carrying goods on their heads to sell to buyers to generate income for themselves or their parents/guardians either during or after school hours. It is an aspect of child abuse (Anyago, 2022). Azonuche (2020) explains hawking as involving sales of goods by going from house to house, street to street and along major roads with traffic, among others. In broader terms, the person who engages in it is called the “hawker”, but when the hawker is below 18 years of age, it is commonly referred to as the child hawker/hawking. According to Jibril, Abdullahi and Martins (2022), child hawking is divided into mobile child hawking and situated/standby child hawking.

**Mobile Child Hawking:** This type of hawking pertains to a process whereby the child hawks his or her wares on the streets, roads, highways, checkpoints, football venues, recreation centres, etc., without necessarily staying at one particular location. In this type of hawking, children are often seen in their numbers or groups retailing various products.

**Situated/Standby Hawking:** The type of hawking is normally carried out at fixed places. Children involved in situated/standby hawking do not move their wares from one place to another but remain in a particular spot in which the buyer comes to buy a variety of products they are selling.

### Factors Influencing Child Hawking

Illiteracy has been identified as one of the factors responsible for children hawking sub-Saharan Africa, particularly in Nigeria. It is not illiterate of children involved in child hawking per se but rather of parents who are uninformed about the negative mental, social and psychological consequences and danger involved in child hawking. Abdulsalam and Olokooba (2022) argue that illiteracy has continued to plunge innocent children into hawking. The study attributed the menace to illiterate parents, who erroneously believe that child hawking is another means of contributing to the income of the family without necessarily considering the associated dangers. The argument that there is a link between parents with marginal income and the imperative to push children into work to supplement family income (Crosson, 2008) has not been empirically proven in most cases. Many families have low incomes but have not resorted to sending their children to hawk. Identifying the associated risks associated with hawking is a function of the educational level of parents. The literacy level of parents is a key indicator of the phenomenon of child hawking in society.

Unemployment is another major economic issue affecting Nigeria. The rate of unemployment in the country is alarming. The rate at which public and private tertiary institutions are being established has not corresponded with employment opportunities for graduates produced by these institutions. Graduates are roaming the street without jobs, and this has informed the “Japa” syndrome where able and agile young people are leaving the country for foreign countries for better lives and opportunities to drive. Unemployment, as a state of joblessness (Axelrad, Malul & Luski, 2018), affects the financial position of parents. Unemployed parents suffer social stigma, misfortune and are materially disadvantaged (Adebisi & Basorun., 2021). Hence, they are forced to send their children to hawk with a view of getting something for the family to feed on. The unemployment of parents can lead a child to be a hawker (William, 2008).

Child hawking has also been attributed to broken homes in Nigeria (Azonuche, 2020). Broken homes initiated by divorce, separation of parents and the death of spouses expose children to a lack of adequate care under their single parent or step mothers/fathers. Adedayo et al. (2021) buttressed broken homes as reasons why children take part in hawking. They reported that, at times, minors in broken homes are left to fend for themselves by hawking or engaging in jobs to cater to themselves since their parents cannot do so. The high rate of divorce in contemporary Nigerian society, fuelled by economic factors, domestic abuse and infidelity, has been reported as a factor responsible for the use of children for hawking in society (Jibril et al., 2022).

The menace of child hawking cannot be attributed to the financial position of parents alone. In some cases, some children hawk because of peer pressure. Peer factors are a dominant issue in the adolescent stage of personality development. Young people from relatively affluent families engage in the hawking business for excitement and pocket money (Magayi & Sarka, 2020). The peer pressure that a friend is coming to school with much pocket money, new shoes, wrist watches, etc., can influence a child to hawk without the knowledge of his/her parents to obtain money to buy these items. The idea of feeling “among” big boys at school or on campuses can pressure a child to hawk. Oli (2018) posited that youthful exuberance can lead some children to engage in economic activities such as hawking out of the desire for adventure without identifying adverse effects. Jubril et al. (2022) described peer pressure as a gravitating force for children or friends for evil or negative tendencies.

Poverty has been identified as the major cause of child hawking in Nigeria (Oyewale, 2018). It has become a recurring issue that successive governments in Nigeria have failed to address holistically. Many families are experiencing poverty because the government has failed to bridge the gap between the poor and the rich, ensure the equitable distribution of resources, fight against corruption and other marginalization that has continued to expose citizens to a lack of want and deprivation. The World Poverty Clock reported that there are 71 million extremely poor Nigerians according to 2023 data (Makua, 2023). The National Bureau of Statistics data indicate that a total of 133 million people in Nigeria are classed as multidimensionally poor. Akiti (2024) posits that because many families cannot afford good food, good clothe(s), health care, education and other basic necessities of life, they are forced to look for alternatives. Hence, hawking becomes an option for them where their children are forced to do it or where they willingly support their family. Akpotor (2018) argues that while poverty is often regarded as the major cause of children’s hawking, other reasons, such as a lack of social service at home, a lack of good housing, inadequate food and healthcare services, combine to force parents to send their children hawking. The struggle to survive for poor

families as a result of a lack of access to basic necessities of life has been adduced as one major factor compelling parents to use their children to hawk to augment the income of the family.

### **Consequences of Hawking on Children**

Hawking has a negative effect on the academic performance of children in school. Studies such as Akpotor (2019), Uche (2024), Bulus (2016), Folu (2019), and Azonuche (2020) have shown that hawking influences children's learning in school. Most children who engage in hawking perform poorly in school as a result of skipping classes for hawking. Some who manage to go to school are often tired, sleepy or inattentive. This negatively influences their learning habits, as they are often exhausted after hawking in the morning before coming to school and are worn out in the afternoon after hawking without adequate time to complete their revisions or assignments. This situation has in turn hampered their academic activities since they do not have time for school work. The negative effect of hawking on the academic performance of children was further explored in Azonuche (2020). Therefore, the consequences of hawking for children have far reached implications not only for the academic attainment of every child but also for the Federal Republic of Nigeria's general objectives of primary and secondary education, as contained in the National Policy on Education, which, among others, include the following: increasing literacy; character and mental training; developing manipulative skills; utilizing values to function as good citizens in society; fostering common ties amidst diversity; providing robust curricula that cater to different roles and talents; and providing basic tools for further educational advancement (Azonuche, 2020).

Children are exposed to various health risks. In Nigeria, the majority of hawkers seen on the streets of major cities are teenagers. These young hawkers are usually sent out to hawk by their parents or guardians to earn money for the family. In doing so, female children who engage in hawking are exposed to certain forms of sexual abuse and harassment, such as rape, molestation and other forms of sexual exploitation by people camouflaged as buyers. Ebigbo and Abaya (2003) reported that street hawking exposes children to sexual abuse and consequently to contracting sexually transmitted diseases such as gonorrhoea and syphilis to HIV/AIDS. In the study of Ikechebelu et al. (2008), 69.9% of female hawkers who participated as respondents in the study had been sexually abused, with 17.2% having penetrative sexual intercourse, 28.1% being forced and 56.3% being willing while hawking. Okojie (2007) noted that hawking activity exposes female children to various types of sexual harassment.

Many children have developed anti-social behaviours such as thuggery, truancy, smoking, the use of hard substances, and prostitution as a result of being exposed to hawking (Obuzor & Gabriel-Job, 2022). Child hawkers are exposed to different orientations outside their homes because they are in contact with different types of people. Oli (2018) posits that underage children are easily manipulated to indulge in anti-social behaviours that have negative consequences for society. Nsiong and Eme (2011) reported that juvenile street hawkers develop maladjusted patterns of behaviour as a result of being exposed to alien values due to hawking. Additionally, Aderinto and Okutola (1998) identified problems such as truancy and recruitment into hawking drugs by drug barons as anti-social behaviour to which children engaging in hawking are exposed. Child hawking has continued to be a breeding ground for various anti-social behaviours capable of disrupting the peace and harmony of society. Additionally, Ezenwa (2011) identified youth alcohol and drug addiction as problems associated with street hawking in Nigeria.

Child hawking, as a form of child abuse in Nigeria, is commonly carried out from house to house, street to street and major roads with traffic, among others (Azonuche, 2020). The fact that a child hawker has to openly display his/her wares on the road or run after moving vehicles just to sell their products exposes them to the risk of being knocked down by reckless drivers on highways. A study carried out by Sam, Akansor and Agyemang (2019) revealed that 24 hawkers were involved in self-induced traffic incidents, which were attributable to neglect of the road, indiscriminate road crossing and car-following behaviour. Punch Newspaper on 15th May, 2023 reported the killing of a hawker in Odigbo town, the headquarters of the Odigbo Local Government Area of Ondo State, by a drunk driver (Peter, 2023). In another incident reported by the same newspaper on 16<sup>th</sup> July, 2023, an unidentified female hawker was crushed to death by a diesel-laden tanker at Otedola Bridge, Lagos State (Victor, 2023). Similarly, Akansor and Agyemang (2019) reported that children hawking on highways are susceptible to the risk of road traffic accidents.

### **Gaps and Limitations in Existing Literature**

Child hawking has received significant attention in recent times. However, much of the existing literature tends to focus on contextual factors influencing the phenomenon. Many studies on child hawking in Nigeria are cross-sectional or qualitative in nature, providing a snapshot of the effects and consequences at a specific point in time. Child hawking phenomenon intersects with cultural and social norms. However, much of the existing literature on child hawking in Nigeria tends to overlook these intersectional dynamics. While there is a growing body of literature on the factors influencing child hawking and its effects in Nigeria, there is a paucity of research evaluating the influence of cultural and social norms and strategies aimed at combating the phenomenon. The community norms and social expectations which are perpetuating child hawking in Nigeria and making it challenging to address have received little attention in the existing literature. Understanding these factors is essential to developing effective interventions and support services that can address the phenomenon.

### **Conclusion**

This paper explored child hawking in major cities in Nigeria using the General Strain Theory (GST) to explain the phenomenon. It is an overview of existing studies on the problem of child hawking in Nigeria. Literature on child hawking highlights the profound consequences that practice has on the mental, social and psychological well-being of a child. Child hawking is influenced by poverty, unemployment, the death of parents, peer pressure, etc. Hawking poses serious physical and mental challenges to child hawkers. In addition to being mentally exhausted, child hawking is susceptible to the risk of being knocked down by careless drivers.

Despite the enactment of various laws including child rights law, an upsurge in the menace of child hawking in major cities in Nigeria has continued to pose challenges to governments. It is observed that existing literature has only focused on factors, effects and consequences of child hawking while the cultural and social norms influencing child hawking have received little attention. Therefore, more rigorous research, including quantitative studies, is needed to address the existing gap in cultural and social norms influencing child hawking. Isolate some of these cultural factors with the aim of finding whether indeed there is a correlation between them and child hawking, including the hypothesised effect that hawking is deemed to have on educational performance and the general well-being of the child.



Despite the enactment of child rights law, an upsurge in the menace of child hawking in major cities in Nigeria has continued to pose challenges to governments, especially the state and local areas, where the menace is rapidly gaining ground. More rigorous research, including quantitative studies, is needed to address the existing gap and evaluate the effectiveness of this approach. Therefore, to curb the menace of child hawking in major cities, the government, nongovernmental organizations, and religious bodies should embark on more advice by educating parents on the danger of child hawking on children's growth and development.

Additionally, parents should be supported in developing alternative income streams to reduce reliance on child hawking. Free meals for children in schools will reduce the burden of parents and encourage them to send their children to schools rather than the streets for hawking.

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