

Modern Day Slavery: A Case of the Girl Child in Nigeria

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Abstract

A slave is a person who is treated like an object or property. The slave does not have the rights which ordinary people have. The slave belongs to someone and thus, is subject to that person who has the right to treat him/her anyhow. This study examines how the girl child is treated in selected communities in Anambra and Ebonyi States of Nigeria and the effects of this treatment on the social wellbeing of the girl child. The objective of the study is to unveil the abnormal treatment given to the girl child and give suggestions on how to reduce such treatment. The study employed the mixed research method which involves the use of both quantitative data which involved the use of questionnaire and qualitative data collection technique which involved the use of in-depth interview. Data collected with the quantitative method was analyzed using simple percentage and description while data collected through the qualitative method was transcribed and presented to support the quantitative data. The study found that the girl child is highly cherished in the selected communities. However, they are given out as domestic servants or early marriage. These affect their social and mental wellbeing. It also affects their opportunities to develop and make progress in life. Decisions on their wellbeing are taken on their behalf by father, mother, brother or uncle as the case may be. Based on the findings, the study suggests that there should be a re-orientation of the public on the value of the girl child and the dignity of human life. It also suggests that the girl child should be enlightened to know her rights through quality education.

Key words: Abuse, Girl child, Human right, Slavery, Wellbeing

Introduction

In the past, a slave is a person who is the legal property of another. A slave is forced to obey and work for the owner without any pay. However, contemporary slavery which is also known as modern slavery refers to exploitation and inhuman treatment metered out on individuals due to their vulnerability (Kara, 2017). According to the latest figures published

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by the UN's International Labour Organization (ILO) an estimated 40.3 million people, which is more than three times the figure during the transatlantic slave trade are living in some form of modern slavery. The majority (16 million) work in the private sector (Kara, 2017). Slaves clean houses and flats; produce the clothes we wear; pick the fruit and vegetables we eat; trawl the seas for the shrimp on our restaurant plates; dig for the minerals used in our smart phones, makeup and electric cars; and work on construction jobs (as builders). Global Slavery Index noted that statistically, modern slavery is most prevalent in Africa, followed by Asia and the Pacific and women and girls bear the brunt of these statistics, comprising 99% of all victims in the commercial sex industry, and 58% in other sectors (Hodal, 2020)

The girl child is a very important member of the family in the traditional African society. She is loved and cherished. This special care is given to her because it is hoped that if she is well behaved she will attract good in-laws to the family (Mathias & Ukaumunna, 2019). Also World Health Organization (WHO, 2002) recognized the importance of the girl child when it stated that the health of the woman to a large extent determines the health of the nation. As such the health of the girl child is protected from childhood through adolescent to adulthood. Women and the girl child had been in the center of global discussion on gender. According to Kitetu (2006) when the United Nations was formed, its charter affirmed faith in fundamental human rights as early as 1945. This led to the formation of the UN Commission on the status of women (UNCOSW) in 1947. And in 1975, the UN General Assembly proclaimed 1975 as the International year of women. Since then, series of conferences and conventions have been organized in different parts of the globe all aimed at bringing about a desired change in the status of women and girl children. Prominent among the conferences was the one held at the end of the second decade for women in 1995 in Beijing, China. The themes of the conference include:

*Women and poverty,

*Education and training

*Women and health

*Women and the economy

*Women, power and decision making

*Women and media

*Girl Children

In 1995 at the World Conference on Women in Beijing countries unanimously adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – the most progressive blueprint ever for advancing the rights of not only women but girls. The Beijing Declaration is the first to specifically call out girls' rights (WHO, 2019). On December 19, 2011, United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 66/170 to declare October 11 as the International Day of the Girl Child, to recognize girls' rights and the unique challenges girls face around the world. The International Day of the Girl Child focuses attention on the need to address the challenges girls face and to promote girls' empowerment and the fulfillment of their human rights (Marie, 2021).

The convention also stated categorically that the adolescent girls have the right to a safe, educated, and healthy life, not only during these critical formative years, but also as they mature into women. If effectively supported during the adolescent years, girls have the potential to change the world – both as the empowered girls of today and as tomorrow's workers, mothers, entrepreneurs, mentors, household heads, and political leaders (United Nations Educational Scientific & Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2021). An investment in realising the power of adolescent girls upholds their rights today and promises a more equitable and prosperous future, one in which half of humanity is an equal partner in solving the problems of climate change, political conflict, economic growth, disease prevention, and global sustainability (UNESCO, 2021).

Despite all these conferences and deliberations, there are still reoccurring issues, especially on the girl children. The girl child who is the focus of this study is being exploited and deprived of her fundamental human rights in different parts of the globe particularly in the developing nations. They are forced to work against their will; they work under threat, intimidation or coercion. Some of them are forced into early marriages, sexual exploitation and forced unpaid prostitution (Kitetu, 2006). Involvement of some parents, close relatives and friends in this on-going social problem has been a source of worry to scholars;

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Uchendu (2005) noted that in Nigeria, parents (particularly fathers) especially in the rural community's use their girls as currency to settle debts thereby reducing the girl child to a commodity for exchange. Parents and relatives also give out their daughters in other to secure economic safety for the daughter and the family (Iffih, 2003). In south east Nigeria which is the study site, there is a popular saying that the female child is identified by either the father, brother, uncle and later in life husband. These categories of people take decision for the girl child at different stages of her life. They may at any stage of her life send her out as a domestic servant, give her out to marriage against her wish, use as a commercial sex worker, or subject her to other forms of inhuman treatment. All these practices are direct forms of discrimination against the girl child who as a result of the practices are often deprived of her basic rights to health, education, economic empowerment, social and political rights and gender equity (UNICEF, 2002).

This study therefore examines how the girl child is treated in Ayamelum Local Government Area of Anambra State and Ohaukwu Local Government Area of Eboyi State, Nigeria and the effects of this treatment on the social wellbeing of the girl child.

Objective of the study:

The objective of the study is to unveil the abnormal treatment given to the girl child and make suggestions on how to reduce such harmful treatments

Theoretical Orientation

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is the Conflict theory by Marx (1848). The theory states that disorder, disagreement, hostility among individuals and groups as well as lack of harmony in the system is due to the neglect of some parts of the system. As a result, there is continuous struggle over power and resources. The social structure here is a temporary and fragile combination of conflicting or competing social forces. Marx is of the view that groups are rooted in family and the educational level of the family shares a style of life and attitude (Haralambus & Heald, 2006).

Marxism perceives a collective production force in the society as opposed to the ownership of private properties of factories, estates and farms. Karl Marx viewed society as being made up of two antagonist classes: the owners of the means of production and the working-class. This theory therefore contends that the relationship between male and female in the society has been of unequal power, with men in the family as the bourgeois and women as the proletariat. The bourgeois who are the numerical minority within the population would use their influence to oppress the proletariat who are the numerical majority class. This uneven distribution of power was predicted to be maintained through ideological coercion where the bourgeois would force acceptance of any prevailing condition on the proletariat. In relation to this study, the girl child is vulnerable; she is young, not educated or empowered in any form. Thus, decision on her well-being is taken on her behalf by members of her family.

Methodology

The sample for the study was purposively selected from two local government areas of two states in southeast Nigeria, namely; Ohaukwu Local Government Area in Eboyi state and Ayamelum Local Government Area in Anambra state. The two Local Government Areas were selected because of the prevalence of child trafficking and early marriage in the communities.

Ohaukwu Local Government Area (LGA) is one of the thirteen Local Government Areas in Eboyi State, Nigeria. The Local Government Area has ten (10) communities which are Ukwagba Ngbo, Umuezeaka Ngbo, Okposhi Ngbo, Ezza Ngbo, Amofia Ngbo, Umuogudu Ngbo, Ekwashi Ngbo, Okposhi Ehaku, Umuogudu Osha and Effium. Economically, the area is predominantly rural and agrarian with a substantial proportion of its working population engaged in farming. They are also involved in trading within the state and other cities.

The people use Igbo language as their major means of communication (Uozie 2002; Onokala, 2002).

Ayamelu Local Government Area (LGA) is one of the twenty one (21) local government areas that made up Anambra state. Its slogan is “food basket of the state”. It was created in December 1996 with its headquarters at Anaku. Ayamelum L G A is made up of eight (8)

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communities namely: Anaku, Omor, Igbakwu, Umueje, Umumbo, Ifite ogwari, Umolum and Omasi. The people are predominantly farmers. Statistics has it that above 85% of the population is engaged in subsistence and commercial farming about 10% is engaged in petty trading while 5% are employed in the civil service. Ayamelum like every other Igbo community speaks Igbo language and have interest in raising many children whom they believe will take care of them at old age (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2010, Udegbumam, 2002).

The study used the mixed research design. Three hundred respondents were randomly selected from the two local government Areas and a researcher-developed questionnaire was used to collect the quantitative data while twelve female participants' whose age ranges from 13 and above were used to gather qualitative data through in-depth interview (IDI). This category of participants is chosen because they are the vulnerable group who fall victims of early marriage and use as domestic servants. The quantitative data collected were processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) software and data analysis was performed using descriptive method. The qualitative data were analyzed using the manual content analysis.

Findings

Three hundred questionnaires were distributed to respondents in Ohaukwu LGA in Ebonyi State and Ayamelum LGA of Anambra State. Findings showed that 50% of the respondents are from Ebonyi State and 50% are from Anambra State, 45.2% are male while 54.8 are female, 40.6% are within the age bracket of 15-20, 18.6% are within the age bracket of 21-25, 28.8% are within the age bracket of 26-30, while 12.0% are 30 years and above.

A look at the marital status showed that 50.4% of the respondents are married, 42.9% are single, and 1.7% is divorced while 5.0% are widowed. We also observed that 37.9% of the respondents has no formal education, 25.3% are First School Leaving Certificate (FSLC) holders. 32.7% are Senior School Certificate (SSCE) holders and 2.6% are various degree holders. On the occupational status of the respondents, 55.9% are farmers, 23.7% are traders while 13.6% are public/civil servants. Most of the respondents do not know how

much they earn annually, however 18.6% stated that they earn one hundred thousand naira (N100,000.00) and above annually.

Majority of the respondents perceive the girl child as an important member of the family. Up to 64.9% of the respondents stated that the girl child is loved and cherished in the family, 32.0% stated that the girl child is very hard working and can take care of the home more than their male counterpart. According to our IDI participants:

A girl is a very good thing in the family. She is the person who will sweep the house, wash the clothes and plates, cook, fetch fire wood and many other house works without being told do it. The boys will not do it unless you told them. A girl is a blessing. God created them special (30 years male trader Ohaukwu LGA, Eboyi State)

I have four girls and I love them because they take care of me more than my boys. I have sent two of the girls out to my brothers houses in the city because I cannot take care of all my children. Nobody wants a boy as a house help because they are not hard working like the girls (27 year old male farmer, Ayamelum LGA, Anambra State)

Female children are special. They bring good in-laws to the family if you train them very well. They can also bring shame to the family if they are not well trained. It is also good to let her marry early for two reasons (1) so that she will not spoil (2) so that her time does not pass (28 years female civil servant Ohaukwu LGA, Eboyi State)

If you are a girl, you are trained to know that you are a wife in the making. So everything about the girl child is aimed at making her a good home maker. At times they are sent to other homes as domestic workers so that they will learn more about housekeeping (22years female farmer, Ayamelum LGA, Anambra State).

Majority of the respondents stated that culture plays an important role on how the girl child is treated in any society. Up to 50.2% of the respondents noted that culture is responsible for the way female children are treated, 10.2% indicated greed as a reason 35.0% stated poverty as a reason while 4.6% noted that get-rich is a major factor that influence the way the girl child is treated in the society. According to our IDI participants:

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Like I said, certain aspects of our culture remain the same. Our culture give room for all these, some persons use culture as excuse to give girls of 15 years or below out for early marriage or as domestic servants. Also the preference given to the male child makes most family to give out their female child as domestic servants instead of the male child (30years male civil servant Ohaukwu LGA, Eboyi State)

Nobody will like to have a male as a domestic servant. The female are better. They are more homely. For some people, if the wife is not around, the house help can become the sex partner to the man. A male child cannot do this. Also some parents are too greedy, they don't train their child but they will want a rich man to marry her so that they will collect big money. Such men who have paid so much money for the girl will be treating her anyhow because he bought her and the girl cannot go back to her father's house because her father cannot pay back the bride price (30 years male trader Ayamelum LGA, Anambra State).

In this of the country, baby girl is used for social security. If you know any rich man who wants to marry you can force your daughter to marry him or if you know of any family that lives in the city who need a house help, they may force their daughter to live with such family while the family pays to them in return. Some families out rightly sell their girl child and use the money to train the male children or use the money to settle debts. In short, I am a victim of forced married at the age of fifteen and I have six children now (24 years female farmer Ohaukwu LGA, Eboyi State).

This finding supports the report of the International Labour Organization (ILO) labour force statistics as reported by Hodal (2020) which states that:

'Globally, modern slavery generates as much as \$150bn (£116bn) in profits every year, more than one third of which (\$46.9bn) is generated in developed countries, including the EU (Hodal, 2020). Whereas slave traders two centuries ago were forced to contend with costly journeys and high mortality rates, modern exploiters have lower overheads thanks to huge advances in technology and transportation. Modern migration flows also mean that a large supply of vulnerable, exploitable people can be tapped into for global supply chains in the agriculture, beauty, fashion and sex industries (Hodal, 2020).

Also according to slavery expert Siddharth Kara, modern slave traders now earn up to 30 times more than their 18th and 19th century counterparts would have done. The one-off cost of a slave today is \$450, Kara estimates. A forced labourer generates roughly \$8,000 in annual profit for their exploiter, while sex traffickers earn an average of \$36,000 per victim (Kara, 2007).

One of our IDI participants also noted that:

Very often poverty makes parents to put pressure on their girl child therefore leading her to early marriage. Because of such pressures at times young girls on their own run out of their home to a man's house for a marriage that is not planned (29 years female civil servant Ayamelum LGA, Anambra State).

Concerning the consequences of the harsh treatments metered out on the girl child in some communities in the south east Nigeria, 5.8% of the respondents noted many children have died as a result of very harsh and hard conditions they were subjected to, 31.2% agreed that the children are over worked and it affects them physically and emotionally, 19.5% noted that most of the children suffer physical and mental abuse, 5.0% are of the view that the children do not achieve their goals and ambitions in life, 5.7% stated that the children become timid and lose their self esteem, 19.5% agree that the children are exposed to different levels of malnutrition and diseases such as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and Vesicoviginal fistula (VVF), while 13.3% agreed that the children are denied the opportunity to go to school.

The following suggestions were given by the respondents to help in reducing the hardships the girl child passes through. Majority of the respondents (48.6%) suggested that parents and youths should be educated on the issue of birth control, 4.6% suggested capital punishment for offenders, 7.4% are of the view that introduction of free education at the secondary school level could help, 5.7% suggested educating the public on the dangers of child abuse, child neglect, child molestation, child trafficking and child marriage and 33.7% suggested that members of the public should report any suspected case of child abuse to the nearest police station.

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These findings also collaborate with the data from the IDI participants as shown below:

People should not keep quiet again; if you see where they are maltreating a child speak out. Report to the police. The child may not be able to report by herself. Let us help them (23years female civil servant Ohaukwu LGA, Ebonyi State)

Let Government do programme to tell the public to stop giving out their children to strangers. Also they should do training on family planning and birth control so that parents can only give birth to the number of children they can adequately take care of (15years female student Ayamelum LGA, Anambra State)

Conclusion and Recommendations:

The study examined the status of the girl child in two communities in the south east Nigeria. The study observed that the girl child is valued and cherished. Culturally she is perceived as a social security to her family. She is prepared early and given out early in marriage to wealthy men who in return should be supplying the financial needs of the family. Such men most often maltreat and abuse the girl because he has paid so much for her. At times the girl child is sent out to live wealthy uncles or strangers as domestic servants who pay the parents for her services. The person may also promise to train her in one vocation or the other in preparation for marriage. All these cultural practices impact negatively on the health and social well being of the girl child. She is denied the opportunity to go to school and achieve her goals and aspirations in life. She is exposed to psychological and emotional tremors as well as health challenges such as STDs and VVF.

Based on the findings, the following recommendations were made:

1. Offenders of child abuse, child neglect, child molestation, child trafficking and child marriage should be punished publicly.
2. Government should extend free education to secondary school level. This will encourage more girls to go to school and reduce the time they spend at home.
3. Parents and female children should be exposed to family planning and birth control. This will help families to have the number of children they can comfortably take

care of and will reduce the pressure to give out any of them either to early marriage or as a domestic servant.

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