

STREET CHILDREN PHENOMENON: IMPLICATION FOR NIGERIA SOCIETY

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Abstract

The street children phenomenon is a global issue, and it constitutes a social problem. No country in the world is exempted from the challenges of this phenomenon. Scholars have rightly noted that poverty among other factors, is the root cause of the street children phenomenon. Some of the other major factors include the maladministration of governments, the carefree attitudes of families and the communities. African tradition sees the child as the centre of the family, clan and community. This is expressed in the sayings: 'The child is the father of the man', 'the child makes the family', and 'the child is everyone's child. But unfortunately, the big African conglomeration is experiencing the fading of this vision of childhood as it appears that children are becoming burdens for some families, or seen as charges too expensive to maintain, or challenges too difficult to curb. Thus, street children phenomenon as an expression and extension of poverty in families and societies has become a social problem that has posed a big challenge to the world. This research focuses on: (1) the street children of Nigeria and their experiences. (2) Some studies on the southern and northern parts of Nigeria is used to represent the phenomenon in the country. (3) It looks into the effects of the street on children, and its aftermath on society. (4) The research concludes by proffering some possible solutions.

Keywords: Street Children, Homeless Children, Global Issue, *Almajiri*, Poverty

1. Introduction

The street stands for the public space and it is the place where children are not usually regarded, but life's conditions drive some children to carry out activities that determine their survival. Some of them work in the street during the day and return to their homes in the evening, while others live permanently in the street, working for their survival. Street children is a term often used to describe both market children (who work in the street selling or begging, and live with their families) and homeless street children (who work, live and sleep in the streets, often lacking contact with families). Street children or homeless children is understood as those boys and girls under 18years of age, for whom the street, as well as uncompleted and unoccupied buildings, have become a source of habitation. They survive through begging, hawking and doing some menial jobs. Some of them work full-time on the streets, and return home in the evening, and are called children in the street; while others live and work on the streets, and are referred to as children of the street. The point of demarcation between the two groups is often nebulous, as both categories of children meet and interact on the streets, and it is very easy for children in the street to fully graduate into children of the street.

Extreme poverty is the main cause of the street children phenomenon or homelessness. The phenomenon carries with it particular strong sets of risks for families, particularly children. Street children have low-quality education and are more likely to drop out of

school, get into trouble with the law and commit violent crimes and be victimized. To survive, they haunt places where all kinds of commercial activities going on: business centres (banks, hotels), major and minor markets, bus stations, the surroundings of campuses, restaurants, parking lots, traffic gridlocks, refuse dumps, sports grounds, and so on. Like Fakoya wrote: They represent the face of hunger, insecurity and social neglect. And here in Nigeria, roaming in their thousands and portraying the decadent social order are the street children of Nigeria (Fayoka, 2009).

2. Reasons Children take to the Street

The street children phenomenon presents a complex issue resulting from a diversity of factors. *Amani children's Home* reported a combination of multiple factors which drive children to live on the street: poverty, neglect, the breakdown of the family, losing one or both parents, prevalent diseases, and verbal, physical and sexual abuse. Although *Amani Organization* gives multiple reasons why children go to the streets, two are prevalent in driving children to the street, namely: poverty, and child abuse and neglect. If a family is well-off financially and comfortable, the other reasons might not drive children to the street. Conversely, poverty as a lack of basic means of livelihood, especially; food, shelter, clothing and good health, can drive any person to the street. Child neglect and child abuse -both physical and sexual, also drives a child to the street. Other reasons include "the failure of families, communities and governments in their roles and responsibilities generally, toward societal functioning on the one hand, and particularly towards care of children" (Adewale and Afolabi, 2013). Baken Lefa included family violence and alcohol abuse from parents, as well as single parented families, lack of parental control, the collapse of traditional values, urbanization, forced settlement, etc. (Baken 2021).

3. Poverty in Nigerian Society

We quite agree with Obika and Onyeihe (2013), that "Poverty in Nigeria is very apparent and glaring. One does not look to observe and feel the reality as we can see poverty walking on our roads, on our streets, in our neighbourhood, in our schools, in factories and even on the faces of those who sit in the pews of our Churches." They also noted the flamboyant display of wealth that sometimes are ill-gotten, amid poverty, which describes Nigeria as a nation of poverty in plenty. Nigeria is a country blessed by God with abundant natural and human resources, but unfortunately, it has turned to be one of the world most affected by poverty. The reasons for the situation are bad administration, corruption, and youth's unemployment among others. More than one hundred million Nigerians live in destitution which suggests that over a half of Nigeria's estimated 200 million populations, live in extreme poverty and are deprived of essentials of life. Nigerians: critics, analysts, economists, researchers, and the world at large, are not silent about the economic and poverty situation of the nation. Onukwuba summarized the situation:

The most pathetic feature of Nigerian society is that a majority of its populace lives in a state of destitution while the relatively insignificant minority lives in affluence. These skewed economic relations do not reflect

the geographical spread of resource endowment; rather it is a product of classical greed, injustice and selfishness (Onukwuba, 2013).

He also noted that the poverty situation of Nigeria has been at a deteriorating pace as the number of those living in extreme poverty is on the increase. Similarly, Igboanugo noted that poverty static in Nigeria has risen to almost one hundred people living on less than \$1 per day (Igboanugo, 2013).

Nigeria has the largest population in Sub-Saharan Africa, with 110million people in 1995, 120 million in 1999, 150million in 2010, and at present, an estimate of 200 million. The nation's oil resources and its management have dominated the progress and decline of her economy over the two past decades, and have significantly influenced the evolution and perception of poverty in the nation. Only minute public resources are devoted directly to provide social welfare to the poor. The problem is partly the lack of adequate resources for the massive population, but also how these resources are distributed and managed, as corruption has eaten deep into the nation. Another factor that fuel poverty in the nation is the inadequate job creation for the youths to keep pace with the expanding working-age population. As *Premium Times* online newspaper (Nov.2013) reported that unemployment rate has steadily increased from 12 per cent of the working population in 2006 to 42 per cent in 2011. Presently in 2021, it has risen above 60 per cent. Extreme or absolute poverty or destitution is seen more in the rural areas. Search for jobs or empowerment has prompted people to migrate to the urban areas, and in some ways, a contributing factor to child labour.

4. The Street Children of Nigeria

The phenomenon of street children has been in existence in Nigeria, particularly in the streets of Lagos, since the late 1970s and early 1980s. At this time, it was scanty, and in the form of hawking and begging. The research of Fakoya (2009) noted that it was noticed in Lagos in the 1990s, and he gave an estimate of 8000 street children at this time. But by 1999, they were seen to be in many streets in Lagos, and since then it has persisted and spread throughout the country. Worthy of note also is that in the northern part of the country which is dominated by the Islamic religion, begging, particularly by adults, has been part of them because it is an aspect of their religion. But children came into the phenomenon when the *Almajiri* schools collapsed in 1904 with the British invasion of the nation.

As in other parts of the world, Fakoya noted two categories of street children found in Nigeria: those who live and work in the street – children of the street; and those who work either part-time or full-time on the street and return home at night – children in the street. But the research of Ebibo asserted that although both are found in Nigeria, children in the street constitute the majority of what is called street children in Nigerian society. According to him:

When we speak of street children in Nigeria, we speak predominantly of working street children rather than of children whose sole means of subsistence and existence is the street. Although the latter are found in

Nigeria, they do not form the majority of children found on the streets (Ebigbo, 1989).

By "working street children", Ebigbo (1989) means children who find their means of livelihood on the road and streets through hawking, begging and doing menial jobs like car-washing and car watching, vendor, carrying loads, etc., and return to their homes at night. These are children in the street. According to him, this group forms street children because they form the majority of children found on the street in Nigeria. Ebigbo (1989) might be right considering the time of his research. That was the time the phenomenon was noticed. But presently the number has increased, and we have also children of the street – those whose sole means of subsistence and existence is the street. Both categories exist in Nigeria society; as well as the third group identified by UNICEF-children from street families; that is, children who live on the street with their families – who are homeless. This research takes a general look at the phenomenon, with particular attention on homeless street children or children of the street.

In Nigeria society, children in urban areas are quickly caught up in the daily struggle for survival and material gain. Youth: boys and girls between ten and seventeen years are usually sent from rural areas to serve as maids in the cities. They end up hawking on major roads and streets. Also, some poor parents in both urban and rural areas send their children to sell items of food, drinks, clothing, and other goods on the streets and high ways, to help their parents in paying their school fees and providing for the family. They may become part-time pupils and students and part-time traders. This affects their performance in school. Ebigbo (1989) noted that this is a widespread phenomenon in Nigerian society thus:

In the eastern and western parts of Nigeria children may attend morning and afternoon school and hawk goods out of school hours, though some trade on the street the whole day. Their income helps their families or house madam financially or pays for school fees ...in northern Nigeria where the Muslim religion is predominantly practised and begging is allowed, young boys and girls lead handicapped adults about on the street to beg. They receive a pittance for their services.

Some street trading and works are away some children of poor families help their parents in making ends meet. But some people have generalized and termed it child abuse and neglect or the violation of a child's right. I believe it is right to draw a line between the traditional family upbringing of a child, and child abuse. I grew up as a baby-minder (four children of my sister). I also grew up-selling some local delicacies for my mother, cooking in the kitchen and doing other domestics works. Other things I did as a young boy were: working on the farm and hawking palm oil in Lagos streets for the same sister, who would beat and starve me when I broke any. These were the experiences that formed and shaped me to be the responsible man that I am today.

African tradition has the culture of bringing up the child to be strong and to take over from the parents. Such culture, like the one I narrated above, is not child abuse

(commission or punishment of a child) because it is not child labour; neither is it child neglect (omission of what should be done for the child) because I was attending school. It is rather the traditional and cultural upbringing and formation of a child and what Sagawara (2010) called intergenerational transfer. On the other hand, child labour is child abuse and neglect, and the violation of a child's right. This is the case of a house madam who goes to the village and takes a child to the town promising to send him to school but ends up using him for all kinds of work, including hawking on the streets, the bus stations and major roads, without going to school. It is the case of people who go to rural areas and take children of poor families with the promise of taking good care of them, but end up using them to make money in the hands of house madams, who use them for all kinds of works in urban areas. Child enslavement also is child abuse. Oyesola (2013) gives a typical child labour or abuse:

Sandra Abeluyi's (not real name) normal routine begins at 5.00 am every day, when she has to attend to the chores of her mistress house. For a child of her age, she ought to be in her last class of elementary school, but she has since stopped school when two years earlier, her parents sent her to live with a distant relative due to their state of the economy. By 6.30 am, she is already on her way to the market to assist her madam in her business after she goes out to hawk to make more money. She is one of the many children hawkers that besought Lagos roads on daily basis. They are conspicuous and everywhere, morning, afternoon and evening, most especially during the traffic gridlock that has come to be synonymous with Lagos, hawking pure water, soft drinks, gala etc.

The narration of Oyesola (2013) above is typical child labour and abuse and is against "the right of a child to be protected from economic and exploitative work that is likely to be hazardous and interfere on child education, or harmful to the child's health or development" (Ladd, 2002). Children who are used for labour are hardly taking care of, especially their health, education and development, because those using them are not their parents. Comparing child labour with intergeneration transfer, Sagawara (2010) explained that intergeneration transfer plays an important role in demographic transition because children are considered to support their family to reduce the risk of poor age-parent. Conversely, child labour destroys or truncates the child's life.

5. Homeless Children of Nigeria

The United Nations Children Education Funds (UNICEF) has defined three types of street children: street living children-who ran away from their families and live alone on the streets, street working children who spend most of their time on the streets, fending for themselves, but returning home regularly, and children from street families-who live on the streets with their families. Adewale and Afolabi (2013) noted that they are called street children in some parts of the world and homeless children in Western Europe, because they either live on the streets or move from place to place to sleep in friends' houses, in markets, and uncompleted structures. The third category identified by UNICEF as children from street families: that is, those who live and beg on the street with their families, also exists in Nigeria society. They are "children of the street" as already discussed above. I intend to discuss in this subheading, the homeless street

children of Nigeria - children of the street and children from street families. They are those whose sole means of existence and subsistence is the street. They are homeless (“without families”). And they sleep in marketplaces, in front of shops and stores, in a car and uncompleted buildings, under bridges, in mechanic workshops and timber shades, and in any space, they can find around. I conducted field research around Enugu metropolis on 22/12/2013, during my doctorate research work, during which I was able to chat with some of these children and found out some of the reasons why children take to the streets, their experiences, including the treatments they receive from the society. Noteworthy is their situation and experiences: they are homeless and without families.

Ifeanyi was one of such children. I came in contact with him and his friends with the help of a security officer in Holy-Ghost Cathedral, Enugu; where they stay and beg by the gate on Sundays. Ifeanyi was sixteen years and hails from Nsukka. His parents were alive; the father trades on scraps, and the mother sells fruits. He is the first of the three children in the family. He was with his father in the business, and after sometimes he decided to run away from home to fend for himself, and his parents did not know his whereabouts. He said: ‘I left home to support myself. Since my parents do not have money to sponsor my education, I have to drop after junior secondary two, and I came to Enugu to struggle for my life and future. I carry loads for people; some pay the complete charge, while some do not pay complete...’ Ifeanyi and his friends fed from their daily income and take their baths anytime and anywhere they found water. They slept by the shops at the Central Police Station (CPS) Enugu. Sometimes at night area (bad)boys disturb them and steal from them.

Peter Onyemaechi is from Ebenebe, in Anambra state. He and Ifeanyi sleep at CPS. Onyemaechi is the first child among four boys and a girl. He dropped out of school in primary six, after the death of both parents, and he ran away from home without anyone knowing his where about. He shared with me that he could do anything for anybody who could help him back to school because he did not like what he was passing through, especially the abuse they received from people.

Another of such children was fourteen years old Chidiebere, from Abakaliki, Ebonyi state. He ran away from home to fend for himself through begging because his parents are poor and cannot provide for him and his siblings or send them to school. He was sleeping at timber shade at Maryland, Enugu, from where he operated. He did not seem to want to do any other thing then.

Chukwuebuka and his two siblings with their mother, lived at Eke Obinagu, near Emene, Enugu. They are from Abakaliki. Chukwuebuka is fourteen years old and is the first child. Their mother took them to Enugu to beg for a living after they lost their father when he also dropped from school. He was begging with his mother and siblings, and sometimes he carried loads for people who paid him.

Favour was eleven years of age, from Imo state. He did not know the particular place in Imo state. They are three children of their parents. Their mother left home with them

to Garriki, Enugu, after their father's death. They lived through begging and slept by some resident houses around Garriki. He dropped out of school in primary three.

The research of Fakoya present his interview and discussion with Ayo (13 years old) who told him:

I ran from home (Ondo State) to Lagos State because my father separated from my mum and remarried. Since his new wife came in, my father no longer had time for me, although I was then in school. He wouldn't pay my school fees, wouldn't buy my needs or even visit me. To worsen matters, when I found my way home on holidays, my stepmother and father couldn't tolerate my mistakes. Home was no longer home, and I ran away and became a bus conductor, sleeping at a park near stadium in Surulere Lagos (Fayoka, 2009, p.3).

Fakoya (2009) also interviewed another young boy, Isaiah by name who was fifteen years. According to him, Isaiah left home in Ogun state, at the age of ten without telling anyone. He left home to Lagos State through a friend who was a child labour recruiter and eleven other boys. Isaiah told UNICEF Nigeria: 'We left without telling any of our parents. The recruiter paid the boys' bus fare to Lagos. Then he took the boys to the city's biggest market and Motor Park to sell them.'

According to Fakoya, Isaiah was one of the twenty-five street children who have told their stories on Nigeria national radio, through the UNICEF support project. In narrating his experience Isaiah also said: 'I have two sisters that I have not seen in past five years. I have smoke Indian hemp like other boys of my age, got beaten by bigger boys, robbed of my money, took my bath in the canal and slept under the bridge. The good thing is that I am alive.' The research and report of Fakoya present more pathetic situations and experiences. He also reported that:

Some of the series told of escape from unhappy homes, while others recall travelling to the city in search of adventure. They end up selling water packaged in plastic bags (pure water) or washing the windshields of vehicles in heavy traffic. Some, apparently the most dangerous, roam the streets with the intention of stealing money or Jewelleries. These are popularly called "pick-pockets" (Fayoka, 2009).

6. Story of the *Almajiri*

The *Almajirai* are a particular type of street children in northern Nigeria. *Almajiri* is derived from an Arabic word *Almuhajirun* meaning an emigrant, and refers to a person who migrates from the comfort of his home to other places or is a popular teacher for Islamic knowledge. *Almajiri* is also a system of education and was originally called *Tsangaya*. It was established during the pre-colonial era and was under the control of Emirs - the traditional government of that time, and was funded by state treasure, the *sakkah*, and the community. Apart from the Quranic study and learning of Islamic principles, values, jurisprudence and theology, they also acquired some skills in

farming, trading etc. Many of them were the farmers of northern Nigerian cotton and groundnut pyramids. They formed the majority of the traders in the commercial city of kano. They are the leather tanners and leather shoes and bags makers in the old Sokoto Empire. The cap weaver and tailors in Zaria city were said to be *Almajiri*. (*Naija Informan's note, 2012*) Thus the *Almajiri* education system was not only providing the northerners with academics (Islamic knowledge), but also with human development skills and services.

The system collapsed in 1904 with the British or colonial invasion of the nation. They took over the state treasury from which it was sponsored and killed some of the Emirs who resisted them. They did not support the *Almajiri* education system because it was a religious education system; rather they introduced western education (Boko) which was seen as Christian-European origin therefore anti-Islamic. With the fall of *Almajiri* system, the *Almajirai* began to do menial jobs to support themselves and the *Mallams*, and when they ran out of funds, the *Mallams* sent them to the street to beg from the goodwill of the people. This brought the system to a total collapse.

Online studies by *Naija Informan's Note* (2012), describes *Almajirai* thus:

These boys swam into the society with no bearing, moving from street to street, house to house, vehicle to vehicle. They were everywhere... Markets, car parks, restaurants, university gates, name it. They became a burden as well as a nuisance to society. They sang, begged and prayed, appealing to the mercy and goodwill of the people. It is really sad when you see this *Almajiris* (sic) hungry, malnourished, wounded; rushing for flies infested leftover food, searching through a trash can for a little morsel, just to stay alive. They roam about, dirty, tattered, bare feet, pale with flies pecking on their cracked lips and dry faces, which is filled with rashes or ringworm...they sleep on worn-out mats in uncompleted buildings.

This is what *Almajiri* pupils turned out to be after the British invasion of the nation. Tyessi (2003), noted that this was not the case when *Almajiri* education system started, as taught by the great Sokoto Jihadist, Uthman Danfodio. He described an *almajiri* thus:

An *Almajiri* is an individual usually at the age of 6 and 15 but can be over depending on the circumstance. He is a child who has been sent out from home to a neighbouring village, state or country to learn Islamic teaching... The Islamic teacher referred to as *Mallam* who the child is expected to live with, teaches him the way of Allah while the child goes out to fend for himself (Tyessi, 2013).

Both pieces of research have some common denominators, which include that the *Almajirai* leave the comfort of their homes and that fend for themselves; but *Naija Informan's Note* presents a more pitiable account, which was not the case in Tyessi's earlier research.

To put these children off the street the recent past administration of Goodluck Ebele Jonathan, reformed the *Almajiri* education system in 2015, building and equipping about one hundred *Almajiri* model schools in the northern states, which could take around 9.5 million *Almajirai*. This means that of the 10.5 million out of school children, as revealed by UNESCO, Nigeria forms the bulk of 9.5 million. The intention of the government in reforming the *Almajiri* educational system was to put off from the streets and integrate into basic education, and thus reform these visibly malnourished, barely clothed and abandoned children who from the early stages of life, are exposed to the harsh realities of the environment, roaming the streets with bows on their hands and begging for alms. But it appears that despite the Federal and State governments' efforts to put these children off the street through basic education- the *Almajiri* education, they do not appear to want to leave the streets. Street begging has not been eradicated from the *Almajirai*.

The *Nigeria Tribune* (Nov.2013) noted that some parents spoke against *Almajiri* education system in Bauchi, saying that it is disgusting. They also described it as an act of irresponsibility on the part of parents to give out children to *Mallam* in the name of acquiring Islamic education. Notwithstanding, begging in the streets is a continuous activity in present-day *Almajiri* education.

7. Effects of Street Children Phenomenon on Nigeria Society

As seen in the interviews and discussions with street children above, as well as in the study on the *Almajiri*, these children are exposed to the harsh and hard realities of life at an early stage. They work under extreme weather conditions; under the rain and the sun. Thus they are exposed to ill health problems like pneumonia, and they undergo other stresses that affect their health. Day by day, they experience difficulties in finding food, health care, comfort, not counting the contempt, indifference and abuses they receive from society. Oyesola (2013) noted some other experiences they pass through. "Several times some of these children are knocked down by a hit and run drivers, some kidnapped and many under-aged girls defiled by randy adults, the course of their lives badly altered permanently by the trauma. The consequences are grave." Some of them lose their lives to road accidents and different types of diseases.

These experiences affect these children and there is the highest possibility that they might certainly react from them, and every negatively. Fakoya (2009) pointed out that the street children phenomenon can constitute an alarming social problem that most times leads to the production of adult social delinquents in the form of "areas boys", or "yes, sir boys." They may also graduate into deadly gangs, thugs, armed robbers, rapists, kidnappers, militants that terrorize society. The female ones who have suffered sexual abuses and exploitation might continue the life of sexual immorality and graduate into prostitutes. They might also engage in dangerous drugs with the men, and join in armed robbery, sometimes to take revenge on those who took advantage of their plights to abuse and exploit them. However, some of them might take positive approaches to life and the experiences it offers.

8. Cubing the Danger of the Phenomenon

No child would pray for a life in the street because children should enjoy parental care and upbringing. Children always see the world as promising and desire to achieve the best out of it. To this end, parents, families, government and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) like the church, and individuals, should help in solving the street children problem. First and foremost, parents should give birth to the number of children they can adequately provide for.

Nigeria government could provide free education as enshrined in the constitution of the Federal Republic, no.18 (3) of the 2011 as amended, at least to the secondary education level. Government should also create more jobs for the youths. Financially buoyant individuals could in the spirit of charity or philanthropy, save children from taking to the street, by providing education for the children of the less privileged in their villages and towns.

For children who have already taken to the street, the four categories on how the society deals with street children: The Correctional model used by the government, the Rehabilitative model by the NGOs, the Outreach strategy by street teachers, and the Preventive approach by NGOs, can be employed effectively. Although some of the street children work in the street to support their parents and families, parents should not encourage their children to go to the street, because such life does truncate their future. More so, parents should desist from giving out their children as house helps.

9. Conclusion

Poverty, mal-administration of government, breakdown of families and homes, unemployment, etc., induce street trading by children. These conditions produce street children - that is, children working in the street to earn living or to support their families by hawking or doing menial jobs, and those who work and live in the street. The experiences they pass through in the process have great impacts on them, and most times they are negative impressions that have adverse effects on their lives, and the society at large. Although the street children phenomenon has become a social problem, it is not a lost cause; it can still be controlled and remedied. Some measures have been recommended. One effective way to curb the phenomenon is to implement the child's rights act and enforce it. The government should complement it by improving the economic situation of the nation.

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