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Child Abuse and Child Labour Across Culture: Implications for Research, Prevention and Policy Implementation

CHRIS A IKE & KWAKU TWUMASI-ANKRAH *

ABSTRACT

The article presents an overview of the global problem of child abuse and child labour, with emphasis on the implications of the issues for research, prevention, and policy decision. It is argued that for the definition of child abuse and child labour to be meaningful, the definition should be culturally relevant. As evidenced by many empirical studies, child labour is experienced by millions of children in Africa (Nigeria, in particular in the context of this article) and other developing countries. It has many deleterious consequences for most of the children. Recommendations for the prevention of child labour syndrome are summarised in terms of action research, education and public enlightenment, legislative measures, structural adjustment, and adjustment in value orientations that generate poverty and promote merchandisation and exploitation of children.

Introduction

Child abuse and child labour represent significant aspects of problems facing the present generation of children in the world we live in today. In the African traditional value system, a child is the most treasured object and constitutes the focal point in life. Some people view life without a child as meaningless, and to this effect somehow something must be done to have a child, even if it means increasing the number of wives one has or consulting traditional healers to facilitate the process of getting a child. This remark credited to Onyango was made at the time of her appointment as the Interim Chair of the African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN); (Diaz, 1986). In the same token, a previous Deputy Director of the World Health Organisation, Lambo (1982), at a meeting of mental health practitioners, described the African child as the child who finds himself or herself being born in a very welcoming and accepting culture. Everybody is ready for his or her arrival and his or her basic needs are even met before it happens.

* Drs Ike & Twumasi-Ankrah, Psychology Program, Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences, Fayetteville State University, 1200 Murchison Road, Newbold Station, Fayetteville, North Carolina 28301-4298, Fax: (910) 486-1378; Email: Ike@chl.uncfsu.edu

The above observations translate into a paradox, especially to non-Africans and proponents of the movement against child abuse, to the effect that the same child whose arrival is often celebrated with passion eventually becomes an object of abuse and neglect, exploitation, war, and poverty, in the very hands of the same culture that gave birth to it. It seems highly probable that children in many parts of the world are experiencing similar social problems. However, the problems may vary according to geographic regions and the nature of society in which the child resides. The world's attention is now being directed toward the identification and elimination of all kinds of child abuse.

Though the concern about child abuse seems to be world-wide, its prevention has continued to be elusive. Institutions, professional organisations, and motivated individuals are beginning to show greater commitment to this problem since the last decade. A particular reference is made to the landmark study credited to Kemp and his colleagues. In 1962 the late Professor C Henry Kemp, a paediatrician, and his colleagues published a paper entitled "The Battered Child Syndrome" – a term

"...to characterise a clinical condition in young children who have received serious physical abuse, generally from a parent or foster parent" (Kemp, et al, 1962).

This paper by Kemp and his associates was revolutionary because physicians had great difficulty in believing that parents could have attacked their children and they attempted to obliterate such beliefs from their minds, even in the face of obvious circumstantial evidence.

Kemp's landmark study stimulated a number of researches along the lines of causality, detection, treatment, rehabilitation, protection, and prevention at the individual, family, and community levels. Many early and recent researchers (eg, Gil, 1975; Gelles, 1978; Obikeze, 1986; Okpara, 1986; Claussen & Crittenden, 1991; McGee, et al, 1991; Becker, et al, 1995) on these issues have produced abundant evidence demonstrating copious atrocities against children in today's world. In the thinking of these researchers, child abuse and neglect is no longer considered only as a local issue but rather as a global problem, requiring the attention of every country. The discussions that follow reveal some of the organised efforts to wage an active war against the abnormality of child abuse and child labour in various contexts.

International Movement Against Child Abuse and Child Labour

In pursuit of the goal to check the rising trend in child abuse and child labour a group of people from Europe and the United States met in Italy in 1975 to discuss the possibility of establishing, on an international level, an organisation that could dedicate itself to the struggle against the abuse, neglect and exploitation of children. Out of this meeting, the International Society for Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ISPCAN) was born (Ebigbo et al, 1986). Its aim was to facilitate the exchange of information and experience between people from many countries, wherever an effort is being made to combat the growing tragedy of child abuse.

The Organisation hoped that the expertise of professionals including medical doctors, nurses, psychologists, social workers, legal practitioners, and many others could positively impact those who must face this terrible problem each day in their own regions. The initial responsibility was to hold an International Congress every two years with emphasis on the multi-disciplinary character of the organisation. This resulted in the International Congress in Geneva 1976, London 1978, Amsterdam 1981, Paris 1982, Montreal 1984, and Sydney 1986. At the Congress in Paris 1982, attention was directed to the African countries. At the 5th Congress in Montreal a special seminar supported by the World Health Organisation (WHO) was organised especially for members from developing countries (Ebigbo, et al, 1986).

The African Network for the Prevention and Protection against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) was born in September 1984 in Montreal at the 5th International Congress on the Prevention of Abuse and Neglect. One of its objectives was to set up a task force on African Network which would explore the phenomenon of child abuse and neglect in the African context (Ebigbo, et al, 1986). The work of this committee gave rise to the First International Workshop on Child Labour in Africa, which took place in Enugu, Nigeria, in April 1986.

This paper is an attempt to critically evaluate the problems of child labour in Africa, with specific focus on exploitative child labour in Nigeria. Nigeria appears to have acquired a reputation for human abuse problems, involving unethical and exploitative attitudes toward working children. Evidence from recent studies shows that the abuse on children by way of child labour has reached an astronomical proportion since the last two decades (Amatu, 1981; Ekwe, 1986; Obikeze, 1986; Onwuzuirke, 1986; Akanne, 1986). The Nigerian international workshop cited above provided substantial evidence regarding the wide-spread nature of

child labour in Africa. Apart from examining the definitional issues, also attention will be given to preventive measures and recommendations for policy implementations against child labour in Africa.

Definitional Issues Involving Child Abuse and Child Labour

Child abuse

There are obvious issues regarding the definitions of both child abuse and child labour which deserve to be discussed. The varying expectations and goals of childrearing, which different cultures have for their children, underscore the observation that the definition of child abuse can be a complicated exercise. Complications in definition tend to arise when one approaches the definition from one-dimensional or one cultural viewpoint, without giving much consideration to the multicultural or multiracial realities in the meanings attached to the various approaches to child upbringing. As posed by Onwuzurike (1986), "*Is child abuse a cultural norm or misapplied term?*" If it is a norm, one would expect that the definitional standards applicable to the concepts should reflect the standards and values applicable to a given culture. Otherwise, the definer should strive to avoid a global or non-culture relevant definition.

Many literatures on child abuse (Fontana, 1964; Gil, 1975; Daniel, 1976; Kemp, et al, 1962; Wolfe, Reppucci & Hart, 1995) have emphasised either the physical or the emotional concomitants of the construct. This writer actually subscribes to that kind of focus so long as the definition of child abuse concept meets the psychological criteria for abnormality or maladjustment with respect to the child. Otherwise, it may create problems in the perspective of cultural norm and value-orientation. For instance, Diaz (1986), while presenting a workshop on child abuse in Nairobi, cited a confidential comment by an influential woman participant to the effect that "*No African mother will abuse and neglect her own child!*"

Even though such a comment appears naive, it is important in the sense that it reveals the sincerity in the affection African mothers have toward their children. On the other hand, the statement may be interpreted as a manifestation of conceptual error on the part of the woman, a demonstration of lack of knowledge about child abuse and neglect, and perhaps a denial mechanism regarding the realities of the issue. The implication is that different cultures interpret child abuse in different ways. Thus, lack of appreciation of the cultural differences in the meaning, incidence, and character of child abuse reinforces the lingering controversy regarding the definition of the construct.

Finally, child abuse is an amorphous and multifaceted phenomenon. It would be difficult to come to grips with a single definition that embraces the various

dimensions of this phenomenon. Since definition preempts the nature of preventive paradigm for any form of child abuse, an operational definition would minimise the difficulties of a global definition, as well as reduce the negative impact of ambitious holistic preventive measures which is a *sine qua non* for such definition.

The psychological impact of child labour can never be overestimated. Childhood is the period of personality formation. The physical and emotional stress of work, combined with the denial of opportunities to play or interact fully socially with peers and to explore the world, could doom a child to a personality and behavioural maladjustment. Furthermore, emotional abuse and neglect, separation from family, monotony, and the burdens of premature responsibility, will most likely have some permanent adverse impact on the working child.

Recommendations

Recommendations for policy implementation are suggested in the following important areas: research, public enlightenment campaign, professional organisations, compulsory free primary education, change in social structures, children advocacy centre, legislative measures and law enforcement.

Research

Research is the key to public enlightenment as public enlightenment is the key to prevention. This means that if people became more aware about the dangers of child labour, it will be easier for them to prevent the conditions that fester it. In the same token, social research must identify the various dimensions and consequences of child labour, which serve as ingredients for public enlightenment. Therefore, any policy decision on the prevention of child labour in Africa should include as a priority the establishment of an interdisciplinary, collaborative and cooperative research program, involving psychologists, social workers, paediatricians, psychiatrists, nurses, sociologists, etc, who should cooperate in the investigation of the impact of child labour on the child's physical and mental health. Data obtained from such undertakings would serve as raw materials for the development of relevant preventive policy on child labour.

Public Enlightenment Campaign

Intensive public enlightenment campaign strategies should be articulated as a means of educating the masses about the phenomenon of child labour. These strategies ought to be predicated on research findings and should be directed toward revamping societal conflicts arising from the adherence to a more restric-

be encouraged to form cooperatives which will help them to sell their farm products. Such organisations will enable women to have resources or income and to develop their capacity to utilise their income to improve their health and the health of their children, as well as fulfil their psychological, social, and educational responsibilities toward their children.

Compulsory Free Primary Education

To eradicate the widespread forms of child labour would require a strong government measure involving a compulsory, free primary education for all children. Of particular importance is the education of rural mothers and girls which, as reported by Ike & Twumasi-Ankrah (1996), is in a very deplorable state. Of no less importance, is the need for vocational training for the youth. It is expected that formal education and vocational training will not only equip individuals with the necessary skills for personal growth and group survival, but will also eliminate maternal dependence on children for economic survival of the family.

Legislative Measures

Though laws have been enacted to protect children from exploitation, these laws fall short of enforcement by the judicial and law enforcement system. The International Labour Organisation (ILO), since 1973 and for decades, has been the most outspoken advocate of legislation for protection of children from any sort of exploitation. As Naidu (1986) pointed out, though some countries have ratified the ILO conventions, a large number of countries are yet to do so. Even those countries who have ratified some of the conventions did not implement fully in their states what they had ratified (Naidu, 1986). It is vital for every government to evoke and rededicate itself to the Child Labour Laws that exist in their respective regions.

Conclusion

In articulating the issues regarding child abuse and the related exploitative child labour, experts must fight shy of the obsession of global definition of the issue. The definition of child labour or child abuse should be operationalised to reflect the cultural diversity and cultural meanings of the concepts. Child labour is practised in many countries in different ways. It appears to be even practised in greater frequency in Africa and many developing societies. Its impact takes a toll on the mental and physical health of all children involved. The socioeconomic structure of society that creates poverty, coupled with ignorance and lack of education on the part of parents, appears to be the factor that causes the greatest harm on children. The Government is called upon for quick response to the problem of child labour by promulgating laws that define the kind of work children should be expected to perform that would not conflict with school time. Any such policy should specify the maximum duration of child work, and the means of direct reward to the child. Finally, if child labour should prevail, its primary purpose should be for the physical, psychological, social and economic enhancement of the child's well-being, rather than for the selfish interest of the exploiters and perpetrators of child labour.

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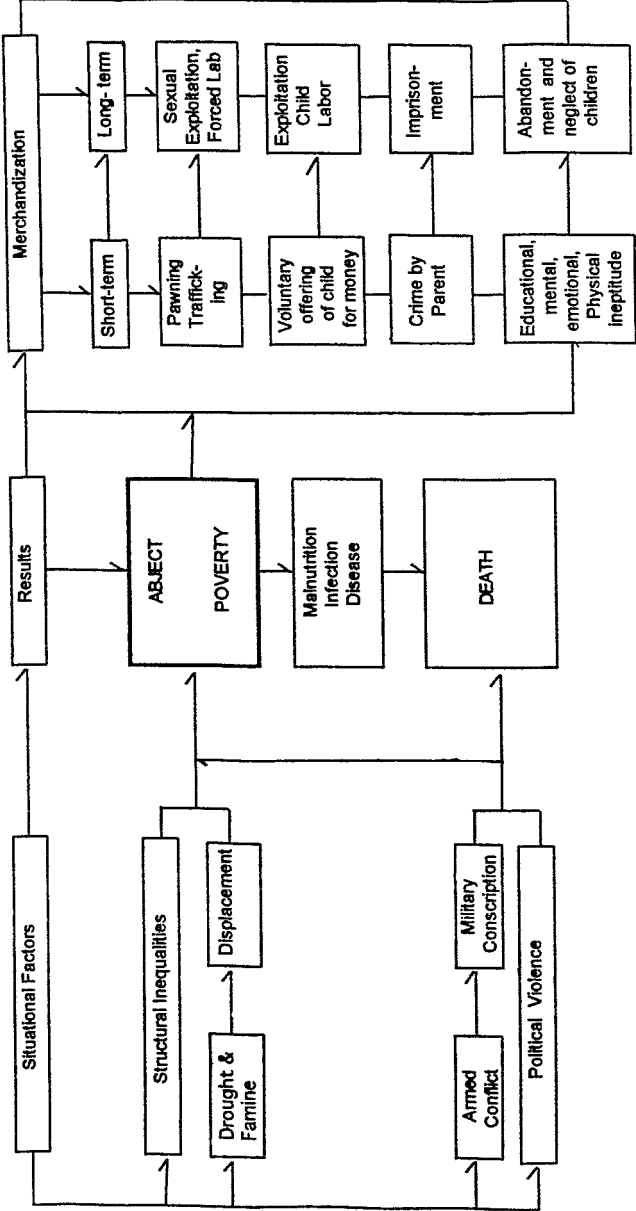
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THE COURSE OF CHILD LABOR AND CHILD ABUSE



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