

Child Abuse: Cultural Values, Poverty or Imported Concepts: The Case for House Helps

Regina Eya

Department of Psychology
Enugu State University of Science and Technology

Introduction

When the systematic study of child abuse and neglect took off at the inception of the African Network for the Protection and Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) in the late 1980s, the Nigerian society got quickly sensitised to the idea of facing up to the fact that certain behaviours constituted maltreatment of children. Subsequently there arose a hue and cry over what we should accept as abusive, and both scholars and activists were warned to be cautious about adopting western ideas and concepts without adequate reflection. Among scholars who attended the first few conferences, there also arose arguments as to whether child maltreatment, (used to describe both abuse and neglect) was due to poverty (Ewuruigwe, 1986), or cultural norms of child rearing, (Afamefuna, 1986) being misinterpreted in the wake of the new found label of child abuse.

Traditionally, child maltreatment (referring to both abuse and neglect), was observed and highlighted and in specific cases condemned. Examples include the child who was beaten up or over laboured by the father's other wife in a polygamous setting or a wicked employer of a minor employed as domestic servant or apprenticed to some skilled tradesman or craftsman. These were narrated in folk tales and nursery rhymes and were almost always expected but for a few exceptions.

However the highly publicised campaign against child maltreatment included items hereto not discussed in familiar circles. Such items included female genital mutilation, pulling of the ear that led to perforation of the ear drum, exploitative child labour, hawking, child marriage, etc. Confusions of the term abuse and neglect as well as child labour and exploitative child labour prevailed. Added to these were the intentionality or otherwise of the perpetrator and the personal awareness or otherwise of the so-called victim. In other words, abuse took place whether the perpetrator intended it or not and whether the child felt or did not feel abused. Both at local and international levels there was the challenge of agreement on a common definition of child maltreatment. While the International Society, ISPCAN, condemned child labour in its entirety, ANPPCAN cautiously inserted the term "exploitative" to the item of child labour in recognition of the fact, as they said, that many children worked on farms, and in the market sheds with their parents as part of our socialisation process. Domestic work by children was especially thought to be safer than some other maltreatment behaviours because such children were supposedly protected, and their feeding and schooling were catered for as compensation for the work they did. Contrary to this idea were the findings of Okeahialam and Diaz. Okeahialam (1984) observed that young child minders employed in homes had so much to do that it bordered on exploitation. Diaz 1986 described such children as malnourished, lacking in recreational opportunities and often unable to go to school.

Such conflicting conceptualisations increased the need for agreement on definitions because unless people agree on what they are looking for, they would hardly recognise it when they found

it. Attempts at gathering definitions of child abuse in Nigeria by the author (Eya, 1994; 2002) at the inception of advocacy activities led to the development of a Taxonomy of Maltreatment Behaviours, which yielded 10 factors (Table 1) from the 46 items gathered from a sample of both children and adults. The 46 items were further ranked in order of severity and arranging them into two categories of **severe maltreatment or mild/moderate maltreatment**, with 23 items each (Table 11). In 2015 another sample categorised the maltreatment items and it was found that a significantly higher number of items (31 as against 23) were recognised as severe maltreatment. This gave the impression that the Nigerian society was improving in its awareness of children's rights (Eya, 2015). Nevertheless it was observed that items describing child labour like hawking and use as house help were still categorised as mild/moderate maltreatment. This was in spite of the sensitisation and publicity given to the consequences of such items. It therefore inspired the curiosity to examine the reason for the non-recognition of such items as severe maltreatment. The author is undertaking a study to go deeper into this, to examine the role of cultural values, poverty and western labels of abuse in the categorisation of maltreatment items by Nigerians. Is use of children as house helps due to poverty, or is it explainable as sociocultural practice? Or have we been coerced by western literature to see it as abuse?

Discussion

It is proposed that in-depth study of this phenomenon of the use of house helps be undertaken using quantitative and qualitative methods, beginning first with the examination of the data already obtained in the light of available theories of child maltreatment.

Data from the tables were examined to look at items classified as severe and moderate items. It was observed that "Use as House Help" was classified as Moderate Maltreatment in 1994 (Eya, 1994). The study had indicated that house helps suffered almost all the other factors of maltreatment yielded in the factor analysis of the 46 items. They suffered physical abuse and neglect, emotional abuse and neglect as well as sexual abuse more than children living in their own homes with their families. Such children already lost self-esteem by being placed in a situation of inferiority to the children of their employers (Eya, 2002; Okeahialam, 1984; Diaz, 1986). The low categorisation of this item, it was observed, would not attract serious sympathy from activists and from society and this would lead to difficulties in enactment of reporting laws. Excessive beating was considered severe but not use as house help, the status of which would already attract beating. Thus, excessive beating was more likely to be reported but not use as house help. The question was then asked "Did Nigerians favour such child labour because it is a normal socialisation practice or because it serves the need of the poor families who supply such labour?" A replication of this study was undertaken (Eya, 2015) to determine what improvement had been made in the recognition of children's rights in Nigeria. Another sample of 108 participants made up of young and old people was used to classify maltreatment behaviour in order of severity, and it was observed that while there was an indication of improvement in the number of items considered severe maltreatment, the item "Use as House Help" still was classified as moderate maltreatment. It was concluded that Nigerians still underplayed the seriousness of maltreatment suffered by house helps. It was concluded that child protection laws were still undermined by conceptualisation of maltreatment of children in Nigeria (Ewuruigwe, 1995). The situation is even made worse with the present economic situation which has compelled even educated youth to accept to work as domestic staff, house helps, in the homes of

rich families. There have been reports also of house helps who have had to report to their biological parents that they had been sexually molested, raped, impregnated and the pregnancies aborted by the elite families they served, only to be silenced by such biological parents who preferred the continued stay of their children in such circumstances so as to continue to earn money (Eya, 2004).

Theories of maltreatment regarding Use as House Help

Child maltreatment has been explained along several theories (Kinard, 1979; Wilson-Oyeleran, 1989).

- a. **Psychodynamic Theories:** Violence or abusiveness is said to be caused by a defect in character structure of persons, which in the presence of added stress gives way to uncontrolled physical expression. Such parents/caregivers have been described as demanding immediate gratification, prone to impulsive outburst, high in dependency frustration, low self-esteem and having unrealistic expectations of their children's behaviour. Even though such claims have been borne out in a few studies, the data have been scanty and often questionable. In the case of house helps, this theory may apply to the personalities of their employers.
- b. **Social Learning Theories:** Learning and modeling of parenting skills. Abusive parents were themselves abused. This theory states that people learn to be aggressive through the things they observe. First of all aggressive skills are learned from others for example, criminals have admitted imitating methods of operation learned from the TV. Children have also picked aggressive skills from television with which they fight or kick one another.

Besides the actual skills, children and young adults often learn aggressive solutions to their problems from models in the environment when they see that their parents or significant others resort to beating up people when they think the situation calls for it. People who are beaten up often resort to beating others. Violence begets violence. Those who have been abused as children often become abusive parents. In the case of house helps, this theory might apply to the behaviour of the employers who have learned the employment of house helps and their treatment from their own parents who may have employed house helps for child rearing assistance.

- c. **Social Psychological Theories:** Interaction of psychodynamic factors and social learning factors may lead to maltreatment of children. Individual characteristics and environmental factors combine to make the victim. These explain aggression in terms of characteristics of the victim of aggression. Often the victim attracts such behaviour because of the appearance, physical defects, and style of speech, sex or certain mannerisms. Thus being small, perhaps female, weak or handicapped may attract violence or abuse from parents who are unstable. In the case of house helps, this theory may apply to the choice of poor parents as to which of their children to send out to elite families as house helps as well as the perception of the individual house help by the employer.
- d. **Sociological Theories:** Emphasis is on social factors as causes of abuse and neglect. Such factors include factors like unemployment, high mobility, largeness of families, lack of social

support, poverty, and social isolation, all leading to stress. Included in this category also are culturally approved, though harmful, practices and family organisation. In the case of house helps, this may apply in situations where all the above factors play some role. The Nigerian society does not consider sending children out as house help as seriously abusive. Poor parents find a way of making money by sending their children to serve elite families in the cities. These poor parents would complain about large families, unemployment and poverty of course to explain their decision. The employing families may be encouraged in the maltreatment of their employers through isolation and of course absence of legal intervention.

A Call for Increased Advocacy

It would appear that while all the theories may contribute to maltreatment of house helps, Sociological theories, especially that of poverty, would account for the preponderance of children still hired as house helps and at the same time not considered as endangered in such an occupation. The literature has already suggested that advocacy is based upon attitude to children's rights. Any item considered mild maltreatment would therefore be considered negligible and would attract little advocacy or at least such advocacy would be ignored or resisted. It is regrettable that an item like "sending out as house help" is still considered MILD after two decades of advocacy in spite of the hue and cry over child trafficking, and is rarely reported (Eya, 2015). Yet until the economic situation improves, it is difficult to see an answer to the plight of house helps since it is seen as a way of making quick money by the poor and cheap labour provided by the rich. It is critical now that researchers turn more attention to the use of children as house helps so as to produce data that would stir up advocacy to reduce the ugly but hidden destruction of children. Hopefully such advocacy would in turn restrain poor parents from sending their children out and perhaps make governments more sensitive to the role poverty plays in the destruction of children, the so called leaders of tomorrow.

Table I: Ten Principal Axes Factors of 46 Maltreatment Behaviours and Researcher's Labels of them

Factor number	Eigen value	Pct. of Var.	Cum. Pct.	Label of factor
1	17.73.73798	62.1	62.1	Composite concept/idea of maltreatment
2	2.75697	9.6	71.7	Physical torture with sexual abuse
3	1.58651	5.6	77.3	Starvation with subjection to scary influences
4	1.28010	4.5	81.7	Disregard for educational and safety needs
5	1.07342	3.8	85.5	Instilling helplessness
6	0.97240	3.4	88.9	Denial of self-expression
7	0.93984	3.3	92.2	Fostering delinquency
8	0.86989	3.0	95.2	Use as house help with accompanying verbal and physical assault
9	0.72223	2.5	97.7	Denial of rest
10	0.64485	2.3	100	Discrimination

Table II: A Taxonomy of Maltreatment Behaviours in Terms of Severity

Severe Maltreatment			Moderate Maltreatment		
S/N	Statement	Rank	S/N	Statement	Rank
4	Beating me excessively	1	12	Bullying me	24
35	Pouring hot water/using hot iron/object on me	2	10	Not caring for my neatness	25
36	Raping me	3	13	Locking me up/out	26
34	Abandoning me	4	18	Not giving me affection	27
2	Denying me clothes	5	28	Not giving me advice	28
6	Denying me education	6	33	Indifferent to my potentials	29
5	Under-feeding me	7	21	Denying me adequate Medicare	30
17	Putting pepper in my eyes	8	25	Denying me school fees/books	31
39	Teaching me to steal	9	11	Denying me time to play	32
40	Telling lies against me	10	8	Giving me condemned/bad food	33
7	Starving me	11	42	Encouraging me to disobey	34
19	Discriminating against me	12	20	Not giving me sufficient moral training	35
45	Initiating me into secret societies	13	46	Dedicating me to idols	36
3	Over labouring me	14	24	Denying me my needs	37
26	Encouraging me to be wayward	15	31	Sending me to serve as house help	38
27	Molesting me sexually	16	15	Not providing me with proper accommodation	39
16	Beating me without cause	17	1	Sending me to hawk	40
44	Exposing me to bad films/books	18	29	Not allowing me to act independently	41
37	Kidnapping me	19	14	Depriving me freedom to air my view	42
38	Pawning me	20	30	Giving me too little money	43
9	Denying me to sleep/rest	21	23	Over pampering me	44
32	Encouraging me to smoke	22	22	Scolding me frequently	45
43	Stealing my things	23	41	Fighting before me	46

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