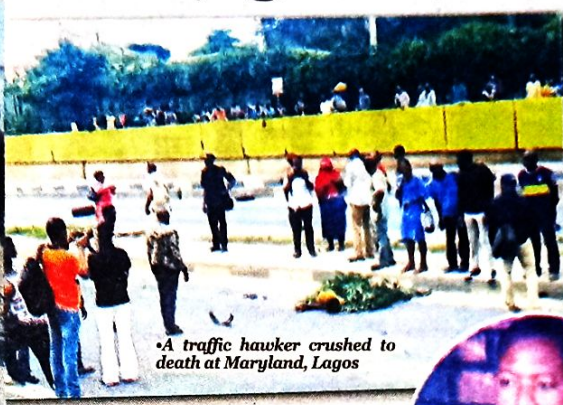


feature

How reckless drivers, hardship send road hawkers to early graves



•An accident scene.
Photos: Godfrey George and File



•A traffic hawker crushed to death at Maryland, Lagos

GODFREY GEORGE writes on how stricter regulation and enforcement could end the menace of street hawking and preserve innocent lives, especially those of children

① That fateful Saturday was like any other workday for Mrs Alice Ikpa. She woke up at 4.30 am, did her routine chores, prayed with her family members and prepared for the business of the day. This was her routine.

She packed eggs from the crates of eggs she collected from her supplier, boiled them and left for the Otodola Bridge in Lagos, the usual spot where she hawked when the construction of the expressway caused serious traffic jam in the axis, both inbound and outbound Lagos. Before the construction, she had other traffic-prone areas she used to hawk.

It was her way of supporting the family, and this – the hawking – she had done for nearly three years until that Saturday afternoon in July when a truck rammed into her, crushing her to death. “I still see her in my dream; we had so much to do together,” lamented her husband, Benedict, when our correspondent visited his Mile 12 home in Lagos State. “She was only 33 years old and didn’t deserve to die.”

The 57-year-old widower said his search for greener pastures made him leave his hometown, Yalla in Cross Rivers State, for Lagos in 1983 after he finished secondary school in 1981.

Benedict said he arrived in Lagos on board a truck carrying goods and that while working in a plastic factory, he started suffering from eye defects and had to quit. Since the incident, he said he could barely see clearly and that his wife had been of immense help in feeding the family.

He recalled that when they met, she lived with an uncle who used to maltreat her and that they soon became close and got married on December 30, 2012. Even though they ran a small business from their home, where they sold food items, he said the business had been struggling.

He said this and other factors compelled her to start hawking boiled eggs while he would look after the shop, adding, “Things were still bad but we were at least sure that Alice would bring back N500 or N600 (profit) that we would use to buy some basic things. We never went a day without eating and we enrolled our son in a public school in our area.”

“Alice had a child before our marriage. Her name is Faith and she is 14 now. She also helps out in the house whenever she returns from school, but since Alice’s death, everything has been at a standstill. Nothing is moving.”

On the day of the incident, Benedict said he awaited her return until he got a call asking her to come to Otodola Bridge. “Around 12 pm, I called her and she said she was about to round off her sales and that she would go to Mile 12 market to get some ingredients so we could make soup,” he said. “It wasn’t up to 15 minutes after that call, I saw her call again. This time, I heard a male voice asking me if I was her husband, and then requesting me to come to Otodola Bridge that my wife

had been hit by a truck.”

He said he later heard that she was attending to a customer on a bus when a truck had brake failure and crushed her to death, while the driver managed to escape.

“We all miss her; till date, Joshua sometimes asks me when she’s coming back,” he said.

During a visit to the scene of the incident two days later, a hawker, Lawrence Abadi, said he witnessed the incident and that for days he couldn’t come out to hawk. “It wasn’t the first time hawkers would be hit, but that one was painful, and then we all still hawk because we need to survive,” he added.

He said in 2021, two hawkers lost their legs when a tanker hit them. “It’s a dangerous job,” he noted.

Avoidable deaths

There have been many deaths from street trading, which most people engage in due to hardship. According to a tally done by our correspondent, over 255 persons lost their lives while hawking, due to accidents, hoodlums attacks and exhaustion between January 2012 and October 10, 2023. Many have been run over by careless drivers, some ended up as victims of ritualists, while the females among them are sometimes molested or even raped by hoodlums.

Interestingly, the Lagos State Government had on several occasions banned street trading, which includes hawking in traffic. The state’s Street Trading and Illegal Market prohibition Law (2003) outlawed hawking in the state. In June 2016, a mob vandalised about 15 BRT buses at the Maryland end of Korodu Road, after a 22-year-old hawker, Nnamdi John, was crushed to death. She was hit by a Nissan Pathfinder and a truck while escaping from some officials of the Kick Against Indiscipline, the enforcement arm of the Ministry of Environment. After the incident, the government restated its ban on street trading.

The then Governor Akinwunmi Ambode had said at a press conference after the incident, “It is not in our DNA to allow someone to just die by road accident or the way it happened in respect of the incident. But beyond the fact that we lost one person while crossing the road as a result of evading arrest by KAI officials, I need to tell Lagosians that over 49 buses were actually destroyed and it is costing us like almost N139 million to put those buses back on the road.”

“The issue is we need to enforce our laws because we already have a law in respect of that and then there is a clause in it which says the buyer and the seller are both liable and that we are going to fine them either N90, 000 or a six month jail term.”

In spite of the warnings, the practice has yet to abate, despite the efforts made by successive governments. Speaking on why he was still in the business of

hawking despite the ban on it, Abadi stated “What am I to do? I have children and I don’t have money to rent a shop. I used to have a shop but the way Local Government Area officials bombarded me with bills and levies made me close the shop, because it ate into my capital.”

Harvest of deaths

One Thursday morning in February, a male hawker died and many other people were injured in a multiple motor accident that occurred on the Kara Bridge on the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway in Ogun State. The accident involved a truck, laden with a 40-ft container and six other vehicles, when the truck rammed into them following a brake failure.

In May 2023, a teenage hawker, Bassey Edet, was killed when a car rammed into a motor park in Odigbo Local Council Area of Ondo State. The victim was hawking fried dough (locally known as ‘puff-puff’ and ‘buns’) at the park before the car, reportedly driven by a drunk driver, knocked him down on the Odigbo-Ore Road.

Eyewitnesses had told Saturday PUNCH that Edet died on the spot.

In October 2022, about four hawkers around the Onitsha axis of the Niger Bridge, were killed in an accident when a truck ran into them.

On Independence Day of 2021, a teenage hawker was knocked down by a fit-and-run driver while trying to cross the road to the other side in Kaduna.

A human rights activist, who followed up on the matter, Chimelem Ajanna, called on government agencies in charge of child welfare to criminalise hawking by children.

Some states have criminalised street hawking, especially by minors. In Lagos, it is criminal for a child to be found hawking during school hours. However, our correspondent can confirm that many child hawkers still line the streets in an attempt to either eke out a living or support their parents.

In 2014, a young hawker, simply identified as Uche, in Port Harcourt, Rivers State, was crushed to death by a tipper, which had brake failure.

Our correspondent gathered from several reports that the boy was attending to a female customer beside a concrete slab on the ever-busy Port Harcourt-Aba Expressway when the tipper, marked XA 608 AGU, lost control and crushed the boy and his customer to death.

In June 2013, a 16-year-old girl was found dead on the premises of a block industry in Aba, Abia State. The girl was known to hawk groundnut around Ezinkwu Road in Aba. The News Agency of Nigeria reported that she was found naked and foam oozing out of her nose. This fuelled insinuations that beyond being killed by vehicles, hawkers, especially children, could be victims of kidnappers and ritualists.

Also, in 2015, the Federal Capital Territory Police Command said it had commenced an investigation into the death of a teenage hawker, who lost his life on November 13 after scaling a bridge around Bolingo Hotel, Abuja, while allegedly evading arrest by officials of the Abuja Environmental Protection Board.

While many of the hawkers engage in the practice to eke out a living for themselves and family members, some others are said to engage in it to serve as informants for robbers,

while some are said to conceal deadly weapons. A recent report by the World Bank noted that more than 40 million Nigerian children were from poor households. This came after Nigeria was said to have over 133 multidimensionally poor people.

With the removal of fuel subsidy and rising exchange rate, which had led to an increase in the cost of goods, experts have said more families might slide into poverty and that people might be constrained to embrace outlawed practices like street trading to survive.

A young hawker, Angel and her mother, Mrs Aderonke, who hawk around the Otodola axis of the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway, said they had no choice but to hawk every day despite the ban on hawking.

“If we don’t come out to hawk, we won’t eat,” Aderonke said. “My husband is dead. We were evicted from our house in 2019 and since then we have been living a hand-to-mouth existence. My daughter always joins me once she returns from school.”

Angel said she had on several occasions escaped being knocked down while attending to customers.

Speaking on one of the occasions when her mother was not around to guide her, the 11-year-old said, “The bus driver refused to stop and I was running after the bus to get my money, but before I knew what was happening, a bike hit me from behind. I had bruises. I went back home with my body aching so much that I couldn’t sleep. I had to continue the next day. It is difficult. The government needs to help us.”

Defiance to the law

In May 2017, many Lagosians were shocked when angry street traders one Tuesday morning lynched an official of KAI in the Ifyama Oworo area of the state.

The victim, Moshod Ayemi, was allegedly lynched because his team arrested hawkers, identified as Jeremiah Nnana and Orich Nwofokoh, who displayed their wares in traffic, in disregard for the ban imposed by the state government.

The agency’s spokesperson at the time, Alabi Rahmat, said in a statement that the mob pelleted the official vehicle with stones, one of which hit the deceased and made him fall from the moving vehicle.

According to her, the victim was rushed to the state’s emergency centre, where he was referred to the Lagos University Teaching Hospital but was pronounced dead on arrival.

Women worst hit?

A tally conducted by our correspondent showed that the victims of street trading were mostly women, who constitute a larger hawking population across the country.

In the period under review, a tally conducted by our correspondent showed that nearly 112 women have lost their lives while hawking.

For instance, in February 2021, four female hawkers were confirmed dead in an accident involving a truck on the Upper Iwaka Flyover in Onitsha, Anambra State. And in June of the same year, two female hawkers were crushed to death by a truck around Loto, inbound Lagos on the Lagos-Ibadan Expressway.

In January 2019, a truck rammed into a woman and her baby in Oshodi, Lagos, falling them on the spot. The woman was said to be hawking sachet water when the truck carrying sharp sand hit her.

Lagos and struggle to end menace

In September 2023, the Lagos State government in an attempt to end the menace announced a total ban on street trading, hawking, and the like across the state.

The Commissioner for Environment and Water Resources, Tolulope Wahab, said it was to ensure a cleaner, safer and healthier environment, adding that the move was to curtail the nefarious activities of robbers who disguise as hawkers to rob motorists, in addition to how street trading disrupts the free flow of traffic.

Our correspondent’s visit to different parts of the state showed that hawking and street trading had yet to disappear as hawkers still line the streets, selling their wares.

When asked if they were aware of the ban, a bread seller who gave his name as Ifeanyi Emmanuel, said, “It’s not the first time they are banning hawking. There is nothing we really can do. Let them find us shops or build us markets. We will go there to sell.”

Experts wade in

An economic researcher based in Germany, Usman Musa, advised the government to call a stakeholders’ meeting to discuss ways of ending the menace.

He stated, “People cannot be hawking on the street. That is unacceptable. Roads are not for hawking. They are for driving. I advise that the governors should meet with the leaders of these street traders and hawkers and fashion out a concerted move on how to phase it out gradually till they are eventually taken off the street,” he said.

Another developmental economist and tax expert, Ade Dayo, said it was surprising that hawkers and street traders paid illegal taxes to hoodlums who pose as government officials. “That is one reason phasing them out would be difficult. The government must be transparent with its citizenry and make sure that it clears the roads for motorists,” he added.



•The late Alice