

Limbs for penny: Untold ordeals of casual

The International Labour Organisation specified that work should take place in a safe and healthy environment that promotes human dignity. However, in several factories owned by foreign nationals, where vulnerable Nigerians throng for low-cost labour due to the dire economic situation, caution is thrown to the wind as safety takes backstage. This over the years has caused avoidable loss of limbs, trauma and deaths, **GODFREY GEORGE** writes

After Mabel Green failed to pass the West African Senior School Certificate Examinations for the third time, she felt deflated and decided to learn a skill.

With an absent father, her mother who could barely pass off as a petty trader with the little wares she displays by a corner of a very busy street, painstakingly takes on the care of her five siblings.

Seeing how burdened her mother was, Mabel realized that taking her destiny into her own hands remained the best option to stay alive.

In August 2018, tired of her condition, she went in search of a sales job in Abulamabe, a community in the oil-rich Bonny Local Government Area of Rivers State, which was quite close to her home, but she found none.

Her next stop was the Bonny General Hospital, where she went in search of a cleaning job but was told by the officials that there was no vacancy for such.

That was when one of her friends, Jacob, asked if she could work in a sachet water factory.

"They offered to pay me N15,000 monthly and provide accommodation within the premises, but I never knew I would lose my fingers while on the job," she said, sighing loudly.

The first day Mabel resumed work at the factory, she perceived a nauseous stench emanating from the sewage waste in the building and on noticing her grimace, she was handed a mask by one of the employees, who said she would get used to the smell after some time.

Mabel was then taken to her room where an official who identified herself as Belesma, told her she would share the place with three other ladies.

Mabel had barely settled in when she learnt that the person she had come to replace had a hand injury and was asked to leave when she could no longer work.

"I was told I would be working in the packaging room but somehow, they moved me to the production area three weeks after my appointment. When the month ended, I was paid N10,000 and told that I was on probation," she stated.

Bathed with boiling water

In the third month of her employment, Mabel said the central socket in the factory malfunctioned and her bosses said they would use the one in her room to boil some water to wash certain tools in the machine.

While she was in the cleaning room, washing the equipment, an employee, whom she identified as Thelma, came with the hot water and poured it on her hand.

"I wished for death that day and the pain almost made me run mad. I let out a scream. Thelma said she didn't see me there. My hands peeled and my fingers produced terribly-looking blisters," she recounted sadly.

"When questioned by the company officials, Thelma claimed she was unaware my hands were still in the bowl, washing the tools. One of the managers of the place insisted that the news of the tragedy should not get to the public.

"They brought in a doctor who administered some treatment for some days but the hands began to swell and I was told to leave.

"I was given N20,000 and put in a taxi, and that was the last time I heard from any of the officials. It was my poor mother and our church that helped me. We reported to the police but no arrests were made. We took the case to the human rights office of the state but nothing came out of it.

"As I speak to you now, both of my hands are deformed. I can barely write. Some of my fingers are mangled and glued together, and I feel serious pain whenever I sleep and put pressure on my hands," she lamented.

Death of 17-year-old in Ogun

17-year-old Babatunde Abdulrahmon was not as lucky as Green.

The teenager succumbed to the injuries he sustained on the day he resumed work as a mixer at a manufacturing company, Mingyi Trading Company Limited, located in Satellite Town, Amuru Odofin Local Government Area of Lagos State.

The sad incident happened in May 2022. Our correspondent gathered that the teenager, who went to the company in search of work, was introduced to the manager, one Mr Ucheanna Umeanna, who assigned him to a supervisor.

The supervisor, one Abdulrahmon and other members of staff were busy in the factory when a power outage suddenly occurred.

In a bid to continue production, a worker in the company was said to have quickly switched on the generator, and as the mixing machine began working, Abdulrahmon, who was close to it, was unfortunately sucked into the mixer.

The manager told our correspondent that Abdulrahmon sustained severe injuries on his body, especially the legs, adding that efforts by doctors to save him at a nearby hospital proved abortive.

The manager said, "It was an unfortunate incident. Abdulrahmon came looking for a job and I personally took him to the supervisor to put him through. After some hours, I heard screams and rushed down to the factory.

"When I got there, he was inside the mixer and we had to bring him out. What happened was that the supervisor was teaching him how to scrape the particles of the PVC material on the mixing machine.



•Ogun factory on fire. Photo: File

"According to the supervisor, a power outage suddenly occurred and another worker switched on the generator, and Abdulrahmon, who was close to the mixing machine, was suddenly sucked into it.

"We quickly switched off the generator and pulled him out, but his legs were mangled, and when we rushed him to hospital, they said he had internal injuries and was bleeding."

Umeanna revealed that he reported the incident to the police and was detained alongside two other workers.

According to him, the deceased's family members were also informed about the accident.

He said, "The doctors were trying to resuscitate him and after about 20 minutes, we lost him. I informed the police about the incident and the matter was transferred to another station in Agboju, where two of the workers and I were detained.

"Before then, I had sent someone to search for his family and they also came to the station. The DPO assigned policemen to investigate the case and we all came to the scene of the accident with his family.

"With the assistance of some family members and community leaders, we were able to resolve the issue with the young man's family. They said they didn't want to press any charges."

When contacted, Abdulrahmon's brother, Sodeeq Aderonmu, said the company contacted the family and they have decided to 'settle' the matter out of court.

Factory sealed

The Lagos State Safety Commission after its investigations sealed off the firm for allegedly violating safety precautions in its operations.

The spokesperson for the safety commission, Adewunmi Okoh, said the Director-General for the agency, Lanre Mojola, while investigating the circumstances surrounding Abdulrahmon's death, inspected the company and observed poor housekeeping, lack of safety signage, poor factory layout for emergency management, very poor recruitment process with no documented training records, poorly installed electric cables and poor record keeping.

Okoh explained that the DG said on no account should any company employ an underage person to operate a mixer or grinding machine without proper training and use of personal protective equipment.

Despite all these sanctions put in place by the LSSC, some factories in Lagos still operate without safety precautions.

Lost limb in Ikorodu factory

On April 5, 2022, a worker with Spring Feeds Limited, Itamaga, Ikorodu, Lagos, Adekunle Shokunbi, resumed work at the factory for the day.

Little did he know that danger lurked and that he would come back without his right hand.

The young man said at the close of work, he was trying to clear remnants of animal feed in the machine used for mixing when tragedy struck.

The 23-year-old said his right hand was still inside the machine when his colleague, whom he identified as David, suddenly switched it on.

The implement trapped and shattered a significant part of his right hand, leaving just a stump close to his elbow.

Adekunle said as soon as what was left of his hand was extricated from the

machine's hold, he was rushed to the Ijede General Hospital by his colleagues.

"I was writhing in pain and lost consciousness at some point," he recalled. Adekunle's mother, Ajoke, while speaking with our correspondent said after her son was stabilised at the hospital, he was transferred to the National Orthopaedic Hospital, Igbobi, Lagos, from where he was taken to the Lagos University Teaching Hospital.

Sadly, Adekunle's right hand was eventually cut off during surgery.

The 46-year-old woman recounted, "We have been trying to have a meeting with the managing director of the company, but it has not been successful. She was insisting on meeting us at our house but we were advised to give a neutral ground for the meeting.

"So, we gave her the address of the neutral ground and when she got there and realised it was not our house, she zoomed off and we have not been able to meet with her since then."

The family's lawyer, Oluamide Adefila, while demanding justice for the victim, petitioned the managing director regarding the incident.

In the petition, dated May 4, 2022, Adefila demanded a prosthetic hand for Adekunle and N40m compensation.

The Managing Director of the company, Dayo Seriki, said the accident was caused by Adekunle, and accused him of going beyond his duty.

"It is not his duty to operate the machine; he went there on his own. How can somebody operate a machine without knowing about the machine?" Seriki queried while speaking with our correspondent.

Although several attempts have been made to get justice for the young man, he is yet to get respite.

"I feel depressed most times. I don't expect my life to be like this despite all the struggles I have gone through," he told our correspondent before giving in to emotion at his parent's house situated in Ogun State.

No masks, safety vests

On Tuesday, our correspondent visited Lucky Fibre Limited, in Ikorodu, Lagos, which produces synthetic hair extensions for a popular hair brand.

This reporter, who posed as a jobseeker, met with a man, who refused to give his name but claimed to be a supervisor.

He explained that the factory needed 'able-bodied' persons to work in the production and packaging areas.

According to him, daily pay was pegged around N1550 and he was pegged around N1800 and said with what seemed like a mischievous grin plastered on his face, "You will work o."

Taking our correspondent on the tour of the facility, he explained that the factory had 'nice facilities' for its workers.

However, his notion of 'nice facilities' ran contrary to that of the workers when our correspondent spoke to a few of them after their afternoon shift.

One, who spoke on condition of anonymity, said there are no safety kits at all in the factory.

"We work with our bare hands. Don't listen to what that man is telling you. We are treated like slaves. We sleep on the equipment. There is no provision for people who work night shifts," the source said.

Asked why he still stayed with the factory despite all the safety concerns he raised, the young man was quick to defend that he could not find any



•Vincent before his death



•Mabel

workers who lost body parts, lives on duty

other job and was planning to go back to school the following year to study engineering.

The 17-year-old said, "I want to be an engineer and I need the money. I will keep saving till I get what I am looking for."

Safety lapses at Agbara plastic recycling factory

In Agbara, a community located along the Lagos-Abeokuta Expressway, sat a plastic recycling factory commonly referred to by locals as 'Waste to Wealth'.

There, our correspondent observed that the employees worked without any safety gear. One of them, who gave his name as Tunde, said he lost his fingers while working.

He, however, added that he had not been able to leave the job because he badly needed the money to survive.

"My brother, I know what I am going through. Working here is like hell. I have lost three fingers. I was even lucky. Before I joined, I learnt one person lost his entire arm after an encounter with a melting machine," Tunde lamented.

Asked how much he receives as wage, he said between N900 and N1500 on weekdays, and N1500 and N1800 on Weekends.

"It does not come as at when due anyway. Sometimes, the company would give excuses on why they can't pay the complete money or why they would have to deduct from it because one was making a phone call or something along that line," he said.

Died in Chinese factory

In October 2020, a casual worker identified as Femi, died in a freak accident while working with a Chinese company, Xiyuan Quarry, in the Kobape area of Ogun State.

He was crushed to death on his way from the residential building inside the quarry site after he fell and hit his head on a stone.

Lack of PPEs

Failure to provide PPEs to workers in Nigeria is contrary to the National Policy on Occupational Safety and Health of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, but experts said no one is prosecuting violators.

Section 5.3 (III) of the policy states that employers are to, "Provide at no cost to the worker, occupational health protection and personal protective clothing and equipment, which are appropriate for the nature of the job."

Fell into melting pot

Another factory worker, Sunday Usenobong, died from injuries he allegedly sustained while working at the Landcraft Industry Nigeria Limited located in the Odugumyan Industrial Estate, Ikorodu.

The then state Police Public Relations Officer, Bala Elkana, said the 50-year-old fell inside a melting pot, while operating the company's machine, and died on the spot, adding that homicide detectives, who visited the scene of the accident, evacuated the corpse.

Reacting to the state of industrial accidents in the state, the DG, Lagos State Safety Commission, Mojola stressed that the state government had declared zero tolerance for factories and private organisations violating safety rules and regulations, adding that it had sealed off Multipak Nigeria Limited. According to him, the company's violation of safety rules and regulations, poor housekeeping and lack of signage led to the untimely death of Olatunde, whose head got stuck while operating one of the machines.

"On no account should any factory operate without putting in place safety equipment, quality housekeeping, signage, good wiring system and a clean environment devoid of hazards to the lives of workers and visitors," Mojola said.

Burnt to death in Ogun factory

A year after the death of Olatunde, workers of a Chinese-owned recycling plant that got burnt in Abule Ododo, Papalantso-Iloro Road, Ogun State, protested against the death of their colleagues through mass resignation.

Over 50 of the workers cum protesters reported the incidents to the authorities.

Our correspondent gathered that the recycling company went up in flames on Sunday when the lid of a charged machine fell, leading to an explosion.

Three factory workers on duty were reportedly burnt to death, while some sustained varying degrees of injury.

Death in another Chinese-owned firm

In July 2019, the family of one Vincent Williams called on the Inspector General of Police to investigate his death in a Chinese factory located in Ogun State.

Until his death on June 19, the 26-year-old Vincent, who hails from Adamawa State, was a supervisor at a company located at Ogun Guangdong free trade zone, Igbesa, in Ado-Odo Ota.

Our correspondent learnt that the company, which is managed by one Mr Lee, a Chinese national, employed Vincent and many other young men as casual workers four years earlier.

Vincent lost his life when the engine used to mould ceramics exploded.

Although the Ogun State Police Command through its spokesman, Abimbola Oyejemi, described the incident as an industrial accident, his family disagreed, arguing that their brother who is a father of three would have survived if he was given appropriate medical attention.

A guardian, identified as Isah Suleiman, said, "The police shouldn't allow them to treat it as a normal accident when the truth is that our brother was allowed to die due to negligence. He is a father of three. His mother and kids are all in Adamawa."

Despite the many pleas made by other workers to uncover the truth behind the incident, the



Abiodun and the scene of the accident. Photo: File



Ogun workers protesting poor welfare. Photo: File

Chinese national was accused of not honouring invitations from the police.

Another tragedy

In September 2012, two Nigerian men were said to have lost their lives while on duty at a Chinese-owned company.

The brother of the deceased, who was identified as Mohammed, claimed the victim slept in the factory's production hall but was found dead inside the company's swimming pool the next morning together with another colleague. Saturday PUNCH gathered from him that blood was coming out of their eyes, ears and mouths.

"To my best of knowledge, when a human drowns, blood does not come out from those places. What we suspect is foul play. Perhaps, they must have seen or heard something they were not supposed to, or that the company is into shady deals," Mohammed said.

He claimed that several attempts to get further details on the case were met with silence.

When our correspondent got across to Mohammed again to share details of the investigations, if there were any, he simply asked our reporter to forget about it.

"Oga, forget about it. This country is not safe," he said angrily and hung up the phone line.

What the law says

The Labour Act, which guides all labour practices in Nigeria, states, "It shall not be a defence to an employer who is sued in respect of personal injuries caused by the negligence of a person employed by him, that that person was, at the time the injuries were caused, in common employment with the person injured."

"Any provisions contained in a contract of service or apprenticeship, or in an agreement collateral thereto (including a contract or agreement entered into before the commencement of this section) shall be void in so far as it would have the effect of excluding or limiting any liability of the employer in respect of personal injuries caused to the person employed or apprenticed by the negligence of persons in common employment with him."

Despite violating labour laws and the acts establishing many factories, especially those owned by foreigners, findings show that the government has reportedly failed to take punitive actions against defaulters.

International labour laws

The International Labour Organisation in its section on workplace safety

noted that the protection of workers against sickness, disease, and injury arising out of employment is the responsibility of the company.

It stated, "Work should take place in a safe and healthy working environment; conditions of work should be consistent with workers' well-being and human dignity; work should offer real possibilities for personal achievement, self-fulfilment, and service to society."

Despite these laws, Nigeria still lags behind in occupational health and safety standards.

ILO harps on decent work

The ILO noted in a 'Decent Work' report published on its website in 2018 that many Nigerians had no access to decent employment. With the unemployment rate nearing 40 per cent, according to official figures, it noted the situation is predicted to get worse if nothing is done, and quickly, too.

"In order for Nigeria to achieve its decent work potential, the priority is to realize labour market opportunities to create more and better jobs for women and men."

"Nigeria has had a decade of jobless growth given that years of economic growth have not translated to more wage employment opportunities and poverty alleviation."

ILO noted that Nigeria was yet to ratify several conventions that are crucial to addressing decent work deficits.

Nigerian Factory Act

The Nigerian Factory Act prescribes health, safety and welfare regulations for workers, including penalties for violation of the provisions.

It stated, "Every dangerous part of any machinery, other than prime movers and transmission machinery, shall be securely fenced, unless it is in such a position or of such construction as to be as

safe to every person employed or working on the premises, as it would be if securely fenced, provided that, in so far as the safety of a dangerous part of any machinery cannot by reason of the nature of the operation be secured by means of a fixed guard, the requirements of this subsection shall be deemed to have been complied with if a device is provided, which in the opinion of the Director of Factories satisfactorily protects the operator or other persons from coming into contact with that part."

CSO raises the alarm

Meanwhile, a civil society group, the Global Voices Media Observatory Research on China's Belt and Road Initiative, identified two major categories of infractions by Chinese companies in Nigeria - industrial accidents caused by lack of safety standards, and forced labour.

"These stories and allegations, shared in Nigerian newspapers and on social media by reporters, witnesses, and others, together build a narrative that paints Chinese factory owners and businesspeople in Nigeria as abusive and indifferent to the health and rights of their employees. While not every allegation has been proven, together they degrade the image of China in Nigeria as a fair employer and benevolent partner."

The silence of Nigeria's federal government in response to these alleged infractions by Chinese business owners of the country's labour laws and international labour covenants points to the asymmetrical relationship between the two countries," it said in a publication on its website.

'Most foreigners undocumented'

A senior official at the Federal Ministry of Interior, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told our correspondent that most of the Asian nationals seen in the country, who claim to be 'employers of labour' are undocumented.

"We already have plans in place to fix that menace. Most of them don't have papers and some move around with expired papers. Some even feel they are higher than the laws of the land. The new minister has promised to clear out this mess, and we must follow his lead," he said in a telephone chat with our correspondent.

An official in the office of the Minister of Labour, Simon Lalong, who did not want his name in print as civil servants are not authorised to speak to the press, said the ministry would not tolerate any infractions of labour laws.

"We won't tolerate all that anymore. We have closed down some factories and we will continue to do so till they learn to be safety compliant."

"Complaints can be brought directly to us in writing and we would send our officials in the various states to check it out and enforce the laws of the land," he added.

'Workers can sue if they feel unsafe'

A lawyer, Mrs Selena Onuoha, said Nigerian workers have the right to sue their employers if they feel and can prove that the workplace is not safe.

"No matter who your employer is, they are subject to the laws of the land. They are responsible for the safety of their employees and must learn to take responsibility," she maintained.

Govt must conduct impromptu safety checks - Expert

A safety expert, Mr Bernard Uranta, has urged state governments to conduct unannounced safety checks on factories, among others.

"The government must show that they are proactive. They must not always wait till the accidents happen before they act. They must clamp down on these companies."

"Some of them are even operating illegally. Some can't remember the last time they did an overall maintenance of their machines. Our youths can't be used as lab rats. They must comply with the laws of the land," he insisted.



Ogun factory where some citizens lost their lives