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Abandoned baby inside a carton

Man's inhumanity to babies

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Insight

• Mothers throw infants into toilets, bushes

By Sunday Ani

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The Bible refers to newborn babies as bundles of joy. That is why homes without them are usually gloomy. But some mothers regard their babies as unwanted

distractions. So, to free themselves from the challenges of nurturing their infants, they dispose of them even in the most cruel manner.

Recently, the Juvenile Centre of the Ebonyi State Police Command rescued a four-month-old baby that was abandoned at the court area of Nwofe, in Izzi Local Government Area of the state. The baby was eventually handed over to the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development.

A few days earlier, residents of Uyo, the Akwa Ibom State capital, were in shock over the death of an abandoned baby inside an empty carton along Ikot Ekpene Road in Uyo. The baby girl, who was neatly **DRESSED** and abandoned near a refuse dump, may have died out of exhaustion after crying endlessly without any help.

It was gathered that many babies have been thrown away like that in recent times because their mothers regarded them as witches or because they could not provide for them. A witness to the Uyo incident, Mr. Okon Isaac, was reported to have said: "I have been here since 5:47 am. I wanted to buy fuel from Total fuel station but as I was passing, I heard the cry of the baby. I wondered where the baby was crying from, but when I got close to the refuse bin, I saw a baby girl neatly dressed and dumped in an empty carton of biscuit.

"I could not go in search of fuel again. I stayed behind to observe if her mother might change her mind and come for her. But, before long, people trooped in, as they heard the cry of the baby. Since we are in a period of child theft and sale of children for money, people were scared to touch the baby. They all stood helpless because nobody wanted to be accused of child theft."

Not long ago, residents of Kubwa, a suburb of the Federal Capital Territory (FCT), Abuja, were reported to have found a day-old baby girl abandoned near a transformer and in critical health condition. They reportedly alerted the police, who responded immediately by moving the baby to Kubwa General Hospital, where she was placed on a life support machine.

Similarly, an abandoned two-month-old baby girl was rescued in Rivers State by the officials of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC) recently. The girl, who was left in an empty carton of noodles and dumped by the roadside, was discovered by the officials, who were patrolling along the New Elelenwo Manifold in Akpajo, Eleme Local Government Area of the state, during a downpour.

Also, Ifunanya Ene from Enugu State allegedly abandoned her one-day-old baby girl very close to Prince Bello Street, Ajagbandi area of Lagos State. She was reported to have said that her action was informed by her inability to take care of the baby alongside her three other children.

According to Ene, when the baby's father denied responsibility, she was left with no choice but to abandon the baby. She said: "I am separated from my first husband, who is the father of my three children. I got pregnant for another man who rejected the pregnancy, so I had no choice but to dump the baby and pray that someone finds her fast."

In Abia State, a baby girl was abandoned near a health centre in Avodim village, Umuahia South Local Government Area, with a note purportedly from the mother pleading that she should not be sold but handed over to a motherless baby's home or any well-meaning Nigerian, who could take care of her. Similarly, in Minna, Niger State, a baby boy still with his umbilical cord attached, was dumped inside a well.

Putting the issue in perspective, the Director of Child Development in the Nasarawa State Ministry of Women Affairs, Mrs. Yomi Adagazu, recently raised the alarm over the increase in abandonment babies in Lafia, the state capital, and its environs.

She noted that, in the last one month, three babies had been abandoned at different locations. Adagazu said: "We recall that a day-old baby girl was abandoned along Shendam Road, Lafia, on November 1, while another baby boy was dumped at the Bukan-Sidi cemetery the next day.

"The baby's mother, a 17-year-old lady, eventually turned herself in to the police and claimed maternity of the child. She cited frustration as reason for her action and had been reunited with the baby while efforts are on to establish the veracity of her claims."

She described the way women were abandoning their babies as unfortunate, in spite of the fact that the babies were precious gifts from God. She, therefore, appealed to members of the public and organisations to assist orphanages in the state in catering for the children.

Why abandon a baby?

But why would a woman throw away a baby she carried in her womb for nine months and gave birth to amid severe pain? Checks by Daily Sun revealed that the reasons range from the fear of being a single parent to men's penchant to deny responsibility for pregnancies, to poor financial state of the mothers in question as well as mental instability, among others.

Reacting to the development, the presenter of the popular television talk show, Inside Out with Agatha, Agatha Amata, said: "I cannot answer that question because I don't know. I can never do that and I can't understand what will make a person do that. So, I am a wrong person to

talk to on that because that is something I cannot even comprehend."

But Sandra (other names withheld) said that it was like a spell was cast on her when she threw away her baby many years ago. "My family was living in Kafanchan, Kaduna State. I became pregnant for my boyfriend and I ran away from home because he denied responsibility. I managed to have the baby and due to pressure, in terms of hardship, I threw away the baby. That was the biggest mistake of my life. I was arrested and detained. My father sold all he had laboured to acquire over the years to bring me out of the mess. My family left the place in disgrace. Each time I remember it, I shudder. There was a time I contemplated suicide because of the shame," she said in a quaking voice. Coordinator of a non-governmental organisation, Family Reloaded Organisation, Mrs. Sesi Sebinun, believes that any woman who abandons her child may be a psychiatric case. "Maybe such a woman has a psychiatric problem because there is nothing in this world that will make a woman to abandon her baby," she said.

She argued that the chemistry between a mother and a child is so strong that any woman who even contemplates abandoning her baby after nine months of pregnancy must undergo psychological evaluation.

"Any woman who actually carried a baby for nine months, and what comes to her mind after giving birth is to abandon such a child, must be subjected to a psychiatric test," she submitted.

However, she agrees that people give different reasons for the deed but suggested that such persons should be enlightened to know that they have other alternatives than abandoning their babies.

She said: "A lot of people who do it will tell you that they are not ready to have a baby. They will say they can't take care of the baby because of the financial involvement and all that. Concerning teenagers who do that, maybe after getting pregnant, the men that put them in the family way abandon them because they will not want to take responsibility and after having the child the next thing the teenager will think of is to abandon the baby. I think they should be enlightened because, if something like that happens, there are a lot of things that the person can do instead of abandoning the child."

Sociological perspective

Sharing his thoughts on the ugly trend, a sociologist at the Nigerian Institute of Journalism (NIJ), Ogba, Lagos, Mr. Isaac Otumala, insisted that there are sociological reasons behind the scourge. He cited unwanted pregnancy as one of the major reasons behind the trend, saying: "Rather than seeing the babies as a blessing, they see them as a disturbance. Most of the culprits are unmarried women and, when the baby is born out of wedlock, they hardly find anybody to take care of them. That also has a link with lack of money to take care of the baby, thereby forcing them to abandon such babies."

He also identified integrity as a factor, because, "We are ashamed of being single parents in this part of the country, unlike in some other climes where they are celebrated. So, to avoid being seen by the society as a single mother, most ladies will take the easy way out, which is abandoning the baby. In some climes, government takes care of single mothers, such that they too can take care of their babies, but here there is nothing like that."

Otumala also noted that the fear of not getting married in the future equally drives young ladies to abandon their child, so as not to be seen as having had a baby before. "They see the child as a hindrance to getting married in future; so they tend to get rid of these babies."

On whether the reasons so far adduced are enough for any woman to abandon her child, he further said: "They are not enough, but when you look at it properly, you can also see that ignorance and illiteracy play a great role in all of these. If they are aware that these babies are blessings from God and could be the only ones in their womb, in their entire lifetime, they would not abandon them. But, due to ignorance, they go ahead to abandon them just to satisfy their desire of getting married and enjoying themselves thereafter. However, it is an act of wickedness against society and a sin against God. You have no right to take any life. So, it is sheer wickedness against society and a sin against God to do that."

Psychological angle

Lending his voice to the debate, a consultant psychologist at the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital, Ikeja, Dr. Okonkwo, said anomie contributes a great deal to the development.

"Anomie is a kind of stress that you get from the society; a kind of environmental stress, whereby the expectation of the society is so high that you can either not meet up with it or use other means to meet up with it. This mostly happens with unmarried women," he said.

He identified unwanted pregnancy as another factor that leads women to abandon their babies: "For a mother to abandon her child, it is very likely that the pregnancy was unwanted. She didn't plan for that pregnancy or even when she did, something went wrong and the child was not going to be something that she perceived to be welcomed by society. So, the way to avoid that stress or judgement from society is not to give the impression that she has had a child. So, instead of terminating the pregnancy, which sometimes is not terminated because of health reasons, probably because the pregnancy has advanced a little far before the issue became more obvious, the alternative would be to give birth and abandon the child. The point to note is that the pregnancy must have been unwanted and, secondly, the woman is afraid of what people will say. There are people who will walk into motherless babies' home and beg to keep their child there because they can't take care of the child.

"There is also the economic challenge that will make a mother to think of how she is going to take care of the child. Economic realities that will make the mother feel that the child will be better off with another mother than herself play a major role here. Such a woman would say, 'I can't take care of this child; this child is better off with another woman.' That is why you see a woman going into motherless babies' home and donating the child or keeping the child where she believes the child will be seen by sympathisers.

"The third reason is mental illness. Sometimes, what you find might be as a result of mental illness. There is what is called post-natal psychosis or depression. A good number of women will have this psychosis when they give birth to a child and if such a woman does not have an appropriate social or family support, probably because she is alone or she is pregnant without a husband, she might actually act on psychotic impulses or delusion to abandon her baby."

Could postnatal psychosis accounts for why some women want the babies dead? Okonkwo said: "You know, there is a mother's instinct to protect her child under any situation. So, when that instinct is not there, it shows that something is wrong somewhere and that could be a mental illness. But, as I said earlier, the fear of society can be so strong that it affects the conscience of the mother to a point where she can actually kill the child just to avoid or escape the wrath of the world."

What the law says

Looking at the development from the angle of the law, a human rights lawyer, Malachy Ugwummadu, said the law prohibits all manner of inhuman treatment and the deprivation of the dignity of human beings. These, he said, are all contained in sections 34, 35 and 36 of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

Hear him: "The law also prohibits all forms of torture, whether psychological, environmental or otherwise, and the idea of procreation and abandoning children to their fate constitutes such abuse with respect to constitutional provision, which is also captured by other international human rights instruments, including the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Right. But, more importantly, we have in our country the Child's Right Act as domesticated by a few states."

On the punishment stipulated by law for the perpetrators of the act, Ugwummadu said: "Under these laws, the parents of such victims of abandonment are liable to punishment upon conviction, if they are apprehended. The police and other law enforcement agencies can also proactively move into such cases, without even a petition, to investigate and apprehend people who are likely the perpetrators of such heinous acts."

He stated that the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) Act, as well as other conventions against the maltreatment of children prohibits such behaviours.

"Basically, the Constitution, the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights and then the Child's Rights Act are the regulators of such behaviours," he said.

Spiritual position

Pastor Richard Minet of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Praise Tabernacle, Area Headquarters, Festac, Lagos, said people abandon children for different reasons. According to him, while some people attribute it to poverty, others say they did not plan for it, but in the Bible what most people do not know is that the way you manage a child can even determine whether you will make heaven or not.

He explained: "The Bible says whoever cannot fend on his own house has already denied his faith. In the eyes of God, abandoning a child is equal to denying the faith because, really, circumstances may not be favourable but children are the heritage of Lord and the fruit of the womb is the reward. That is why you see some very rich people going from one doctor to the other and from one country to the other, looking for the fruit of the womb for 15 years or more but they have not been able to have one child because children are not products of money or that of any man.

"Somebody can go and sleep with a mad woman and the mad woman will become pregnant but this is the same pregnancy that some people have been looking for years without success. That tells you that children are not products of men, they are gift from God, and when they come like that and the circumstances are not favourable, God expects you at that point in time to have faith in Him. God who brought the child will also make a way for the wherewithal of that child. I have seen a woman who has three children in the university just by selling beans akara. If you ask the woman, she will tell you that she doesn't know how she pays for their tuition; she only knows that she pays for their school fees when the time comes. That is the lifestyle of faith. Nobody has the right to abandon a child, because it is a crime against humanity."

On the position of Quran, Nasiru Musa, an undergraduate of Islamic Studies at Bayero University Kano, stated that even though there is no clear verse that talks about abandoning children in the book, Islam certainly condemns not only abandoning babies but also killing of children.

He said: "In Islam, children have the right to be fed, clothed and protected until they reach adulthood. A child has the right to good education and stable environment in which to grow up. Allah and Prophet Muhammad gave parents certain obligations to assure children's rights.

"Respect for human rights begins with the way a community treats its children. Children's rights cannot be separated from human rights because children are the future generation. Taking care of the coming generation by protecting their dignity and providing them their needs is the most important thing for bringing up citizens best equipped to serve the community.

"According to the Maliki school of thought, whoever kills his child intentionally should be killed, but other schools hold different views. However, to throw away one's child due to poverty amounts to killing of that child and it is an abomination in Islam. The punishment for anybody who commits the offence is equally death."

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