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— 21st January 2017

How kids are abandoned, killed, raped, used for hard labour and rituals

'43 per cent of girls get married before 18'

'5 children of same parents killed in one day'

BY VIVIAN ONYEBUKWA

With the fate that has lately become their lot in Nigeria, it may not be out of place to re-examine the popular saying that: "Children are the leaders of tomorrow." The Nigerian child, observers say, has become vulnerable to a lot of abuses, trauma and victimisation by adults, who should protect him/her against the vices, to give the truth to the saying, that in the future generation, lies the sustainable progress of the society.

However, all over the country, these young ones suffer child labour, abduction, theft, forced into child marriage, abandoned to die and/or are killed for ritual, thereby aborting the unique contributions many would have made to the society.

Nigeria adopted the Child Rights Law to domesticate the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2003. Although this law was passed at the federal level, it is only effective in some states of the federation.

Children are abused physically, mentally, sexually, psychologically and morally on daily basis. Most of them live on the streets and become hoodlums tomorrow. Others are sent out for prostitution even at an early age.

Work mules

Child labour interferes with kids' ability to attend regular school.

Despite government's stringent measures to eliminate all forms of child labour, this ugly trend still thrives. Children as young as five years of age are forced to work under the worst conditions that hamper their development. They are often made to work as domestic servants, industrial and farm labour, as street hawkers, or worse still in commercial sex industry. Some of them work at building sites, as conductors, while some are used by Boko Haram terrorists to unleash carnage through suicide bombing.

Sometime last year, an Ibadan based woman reportedly maltreated her 15-year-old house help by pouring boiling water on her. She was arrested after her neighbours reported her for constantly battering and brutalising the Beninese housemaid. For not sweeping well, she was beaten to a pulp with her face swollen and both eyes shut from the effect of beating by her mistress. Mrs. Chika Okafor, a civil servant, wonders why people would give out their children as house helps to be used as slaves.

Abandoned to die

Alarming, children are also being abandoned these days by their parents and guardians due to what some have attributed to the current dire economic situation. Recently, report had it that the lifeless body of a day old baby, was found in a bush at Oleh, headquarters of Isoko South Local Government Area, Delta State. The baby was said to have cried throughout the night. By the following day, the baby died.

Also, Residents of Shodipo Crescent in the Ikeja Government Reserved Area of Lagos State, were shocked recently to find an abandoned nine-month old baby boy crawling on the road. The residents alerted the Police on patrol in the area who came to pick him up.

Again, the much celebrated case of a two-year old boy that was abandoned by his family, who accused him of being a witch in Uyo, Akwa Ibom State is yet another classic example of barbaric act and wickedness against children. The boy, Hope, spent eight months living on the streets with no help from neighbours, feeding off crumbs, and barely surviving after being thrown away by his own parents. Luck came his way later, when an aid worker Ms. Anja Ringgren Loven, Founder of the African Children's Aid Education and Development Foundation, took him and gave him the hope to live again through her orphanage, which helps children accused of witchcraft by providing them with housing, healthcare, food and education. Amazingly, eight weeks later Hope had a new life and progress.

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Sometime in October 2016, Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), Abia State Command, rescued a baby abandoned by her mother with a letter stating that the baby should not be sold but handed over to a motherless babies’ home or, any well-meaning Nigerian who can cater for her. The child was rescued by the Anti-Traffic Unit of the agency near a health centre in Avodim village, Umuahia South LGA. The Commandant, Chika said, “abandoning children under the disguise of inability to care for them is a criminal act and against the right of the Nigerian child.”

Early marriage

In Nigeria, statistics show that 43 percent of girls are married off before their 18th birthday. 17 percent are married before they turn 15. The prevalence of child marriage varies widely from one region to another, with figures as high as 76 percent in the North West region and as low as 10 percent in the South East. The Nigerian Constitution does not stipulate a minimum age of marriage. However, The Child Rights Act, which was passed in 2003, sets the age of marriage at 18 years.

Mrs. Evelyn Agwunobi, Proprietress of Mercy Evelyn Group of Schools, Ijesha, Surulere attributed early marriage to poverty, poor educational attainment and strong social and religious traditions.

According to her, child marriage has serious negative consequences for these girls. She described education as a strong indicator of whether a girl will marry as a child.

One of the incidences of child marriage is that of one Amina Hassan and her two sisters; Zainab and Maimuna who were forced into early marriage. Amina's eldest sister, Zainab was first married off, and two years later, suitors came for the second eldest, Maimuna. After another two years, they came for Amina as soon she turned 16 like the other two before her. It was only a few months to her Senior Secondary Certificate Examination (SSCE). However, she resisted it and was able to continue her education. But her two sisters were not lucky. Amina recalled her experience: “child marriage is not for me; my education first I ran away from home to stay with a school friend but my family and that of the groom waited patiently for me for those three days. My father was no more, so it was my uncle who was in charge. When I made a brief appearance at home to check if they had left, he got hold of me, beat me black and blue and said I was disgracing the family and shaming our tradition.”

Amina fought child marriage to get education and she is now promoting literacy in the Shuwa Arab community in Lagos.

Sex toys for adults

Some adults have turned children to sex slaves. It has become a daily occurrence that people no longer blink an eye when they read or hear such reports.

A man, Chukwuemeka Odunzie, reportedly slept with his seven-year-old daughter. The father, usually allegedly played with her private part and inserted his manhood in her mouth. The victim, a primary three pupil who lives with her parents at Ojokoro Housing Estate, Meiran, Ijaye, Lagos, said the father would pay her after making love with her. Odunzie often committed this heinous acts when his wife was outside washing clothes or when she was not in the house.

Unfortunately, observers note, matters like this are usually regarded as family matter. When his wife reported the matter to the police, the family members brought pressure to bear on her to withdraw the case, referring to it as a family matter. “It is quite unfortunate that matters like this are usually regarded as family matter,” says Mr. Charles Odogwu, querying: “How can people hide under culture and tradition and commit offences as serious as this. This man should be thrown into jail. He has no conscience”.

Not long ago, Football manager, Frank Darlington, was arrested for allegedly sodomising three of his teenage players in the Agege area of Lagos State. Darlington, the manager of Soccer Warriors Football Academy, Pen Cinema, was arrested after one of the victims reported him to the police. According to reports, he took three footballers to his house on separate occasions after training sessions, and sodomised them. The police said the suspect allegedly penetrated the victims’ anuses. The suspect said that he started to rape his players in February 2015, and added that he committed the act to derive pleasure.

Child theft/abduction

Amid a new wave of child theft and abduction in the country, Mrs. Ann Akpan told *Saturday Sun* that she had instructed the proprietor of her children's school not to release her children to anyone other than herself. “I hear of how they steal children these days. Some of the perpetrators even take the child forcefully. They go as far as killing whoever challenges them in the process of taking the child. I wonder what they do with these children. This is end time really”.

One Jennifer Onyebuchi was arrested by police in Lagos after she allegedly stole a nine- month old baby in Ajegunle and fled to Okija in Anambra State. The suspect had only known the mother of the baby, Aina Adetola for two weeks before stealing her child. The two women owned shops in the same area and had started to establish a close relationship. Onyebuchi told the mother that she wanted to go to a nearby shop to buy softdrink for the baby and took the baby away.

When the mother waited for them to no avail, she raised the alarm. It turned out that the woman took the baby to a bus station and travelled on the same day to Okija, Anambra State.

Also in Delta State, Abigail Nwakama, popularly known as ‘Madam Cash’, who ran a notorious child abduction ring was arrested by the Delta State police. She is alleged to have abducted children before selling them into slavery. Police sources disclosed that she stole a one-year-old girl, identified as Fatima Yahaya, from her mother after paying her N3,000 and then sold the young girl to a pastor in Anambra State for N400,000.

In Lagos, a man called Happiness Umah, was apprehended for kidnapping a seven-month-old baby in Ijora. He ran out of luck when he was accosted by a team of police officers who were on duty. Umah was interrogated by the police as he was making away with the baby. He was asked where he got the baby from and he claimed to be father of the child, but later he said he found him in a bush.

In Benue State, a sudden increase in the theft of children has also left the authorities, NGOs and security agencies bewildered. The Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), arrested two kidnappers and rescued seven-year-old Suurshater Agber, who has since been reunited with his family in Katsina-Ala Local Government area of the state.

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However, a mother, Amaise, 30, who sells fresh cassava (Akpu) in Wurukum Market, is yet to find her four-year-old son, Terdoo Paul, who went to play within the market after school. Amaise, whose husband is a commercial bus driver, said Paul, who is her third child, is a pupil of Jewel Model School, situated on Gboko road where members of her family also live.

Also, Otumala, 25, and Aer, 26, who live in the same compound, as well as Henkyaa, a Wadata resident, are all victims of the wave of kidnappings. Their seven, and four-year-old sons respectively, who were playing together on Yongo Street in Wadata, were whisked away by an unknown person.

In Imo state, a four-man syndicate who specialised in armed robbery, murder and child theft, was arrested in Okporo community in Orlu Local Government Area, LGA, after they killed a nursing mother and sold her five -month- old baby. The suspects, Uchenna Ozor, Prince Etim John, Chinazaekpere Nwaenyi and Chukwudi Ngbanwelu, said they sold the infant for N300,000 to a waiting buyer. They hacked the nursing mother to death, smashed the husband's head with an axe and stole their baby.

Meat for ritualists

Stories of children killed for rituals have of recent been making headlines. Recently, suspected ritualists killed three children of same parents in Gassol Local Government Area of Taraba State, whose ages range between six and 10 years. The children had gone to take their bath at the river bank when the ritualists swooped on them.

Their corpses were discovered by the villagers who went to fetch water at the river.

Also in Delta, Delta State, five children of the same mother were allegedly killed by suspected ritualists in Otokutu, Warri, Delta State. The five children whose ages range between two and eight were sold for N5 million by a tricycle operator whom the mother had employed for the purpose of conveying the children to and from school.

This was discovered when a friend to the mother of the children called to tell her that her children were not in school. The mother ran to the school, but did not see her children. She immediately rushed to the house of the tricycle operator, who the family had trusted so much and met the man moving his belongings out, apparently to escape. The mother then raised the alarm, which led to the tricycles operator's arrest.

At the police station, the tricycle operator admitted abducting the five children but could not disclose the whereabouts of those he sold the children to. The suspect, however, disclosed that he sold the children to a ritualist from the northern part of the country.

When all efforts to track the ritualist proved abortive, the mother of the five children slumped and died. Her husband who slumped alongside his wife was taken to a hospital for treatment.

The situation in the country has also become a source of worry to the government. President Muhammadu Buhari called for an end to all forms of child abuse and exploitation during the National Children's Day Celebration held at the Eagle Square, Abuja.

The president, who was represented by the Minister of FCT, Muhammed Musa Bello, appealed to parents and the society to protect children against any form of violence. While emphasising the commitment of his administration to protecting the rights of children as spelt out in the Child Rights Act of 2007 as well as in the 1999 Constitution, Buhari said his government would lead the fight against the scourge of child abuse, child abduction, child labour and child trafficking among others.

He thus, directed the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development to liaise with other agencies to work out appropriate programmes including actions and measures that would help in tackling violence and abuse against children.

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