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## **Rural Poverty and Urban Domestic Child Work: Qualitative Study of Female House Maids in Uyo, Nigeria**

by

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### **Abstract**

*This study explored the socio-economic trajectories of urban domestic child labour using qualitative data obtained from 98 female domestic child workers selected through multi-stage sampling in Uyo, South-South Nigeria. Findings indicated that rural-urban social networks facilitate the supply of cheap and exploitable female child labour for the urban domestic work sector. Domestic work in the city is attractive to poor rural families because it provides their children a means of escape from poverty in the rural environment, prospects of improved living conditions and educational attainment. But it also exposes them to economic exploitation and physical and psychological abuses which may jeopardize their present and future well-being. Social networks also provide a safety net for female child workers experiencing exploitations and abuses in urban households. Implementation of child rights legislation, free and compulsory education and poverty alleviation programmes are needed to curb the problem of child labour and to guarantee the rights and well-being of children.*

**Keywords:** Child Labour, Domestic Work, House Girls, City, Nigeria.

### **1. Introduction**

Child labour, a widespread form of child rights violation, is a subject of intense academic and social policy debate (Okpukpara and Odurukwe, 2006; Basu and Van, 1998; Basu, 1998; UNICEF, 2002; Andvig *et al.*, 2001; Bhalotra, 2003). The International Labour Organization defines child labour as 'any type of work that harms children's well-being and hinders their education, development and future livelihood' (ILO-IPEC, 2006). Studies (Rimmer, 1992; Psacharodoulos, 1997; Okpukpara and Odurukwe, 2006; Siddiqi and Patrinos, 1995) attribute child labour to household poverty, poor parental education, unemployment, and limited schooling opportunity. The prolonged economic crises of the 1970s and 80s, drought, structural adjustment

programmes, civil wars, genocides, and most recently, the HIV/AIDS epidemic, have thrust millions of children into various forms of wage and non-wage labour, including rebel and government armies (Grier, 2004).

Studies show that child labour prevents children from schooling optimally, thereby condemning them to poverty and low wage employment (Ray, 2000; Okpukpara and Odurukwe, 2006). The harmful and exploitative conditions of child labour exposes children to numerous health and developmental challenges. Child labour impairs children's present welfare and future prospects, and the eventual negative effects of lack of education on the children's future productivity will become the burden of the children themselves (Andvig *et al.*, 2001). The negative effects of child labour extends beyond their livelihood to their moral, physical, psychological and sexual well-being, and the development of the community. By preventing optimal schooling and psycho-social development, child labour impedes human capital development and economic growth.

Child labour assumes a variety of forms, ranging from formal sector employment to unpaid household work (Lange, 2009; Andvig *et al.*, 2001). In Africa, domestic work in the city is the largest area of child labour (Andvig, 1998). Urban domestic work is largely performed by children pushed into the labour market by harsh socio-economic realities, and whose work has become the condition of their subsistence. The bulk of domestic servants are poor rural girls, brought to the city to work as a means of survival. The majority of studies on this problem rely on econometric methods to examine the pattern of demand and supply of domestic servants in urban centres of Africa (Bwibo and Oyango, 1987). Little attempt has been made to place children at the centre of analysis of servile relations, which is essential to a fuller understanding of child labour.

The present study draws on qualitative data obtained from in-depth, personal interviews with 98 female child domestic labourers, to explore patterns of supply of urban domestic child labour, child labourers' experiences of the exploitative and abusive conditions of domestic work in the city, and the strategies they adopt in coping with the harsh realities of urban domestic work. Findings contributes to broadening our understanding of the 'social relations and ideology of domestic servility' (Grier, 2004) by highlighting the centrality of social networks and rural-urban cleavages in both the supply of urban domestic child labour, and as an important social mechanism in negotiating the negative conditions of this form of child labour.

## **2. Child Labour: Current Findings**

Globally, an estimated 211 million children between the ages of 5-14 years are economically active (ILO, 2002). Roughly 23% of these children are found in sub-Saharan Africa; where 30% of the entire population of children aged 5-14 years participate in various forms of economic activities (Edmond and Pavcnik, 2005; Andvig *et al.*, 2001). A recent estimate ranks Africa as the highest in terms of child labour participation (Basu, 1998). The report also shows that 33% of these children are in East Africa, 24% in West Africa and 22% in Southern Africa. The phenomenal increase in the rate of children's participation in economic activities in Africa partly explains the under-development of critical human capital in the region.

In Nigeria, while children have always worked, the figures have significantly increased over the past few years. The ILO estimates that a staggering 15 million children under the age of 15 years are working in Nigeria (ILO, 2002). The abrupt end of the oil boom of the 1970s and mounting poverty in the country has driven millions of children into work, partly as a coping strategy for poor households. Income generated by

children has become a significant part of household livelihood. Majority of these children are exposed to long hours of work in very dangerous and unhealthy environments. They are often made to undertake tasks that are far beyond their age and physical capacity. Hazardous working conditions, poor remuneration, malnutrition, illiteracy and lack of medical care establish a cycle of child rights violations (UNICEF, 2005).

Child labour in Nigeria occurs mostly in semi-formal and informal settings. Young children are found working in quarries, private households, in motor parks as touts, and on the streets as hawkers. In such dangerous environments, child labourers are exposed to physical and sexual abuse, mental health challenges and economic exploitation. A significant number of these children are employed as domestic servants in relatively wealthy urban households. Their large number notwithstanding, domestic child workers are the most exploited group of child labourers. A UNICEF publication (2005) posits that child domestic servants are the least visible category of child labourers, and this adds to their vulnerability.

Next to work in the family farm, domestic labour in towns is the largest sector for child labours in Africa (Andvig *et al.*, 2001). The bulk of domestic labourers in urban centres are children from rural areas. Their movement to the city is facilitated by different institutional arrangements, including the market for domestic work in cities organized by middlemen, and a fairly formal system of child fostering between distant members of large lineages. High birth rate and employment of women in the formal sector colludes to sustain the need for domestic servants in Nigerian cities. The above factors combined with the fact that procuring domestic servants is inexpensive, makes them one of the largest groups of child labourers in Nigeria.

Urban domestic work is dominated by girl children. The feminization of domestic child work is due to a number of contributing factors, notably the gender-based division of labour which puts a disproportionate burden of domestic work on women and girl children (Afonja, 1981). Child labour is essentially a question of the unfair distribution of labour within the family unit. Girl children work too long and too hard for their age, often losing opportunities for schooling due to work (Andvig, 1998). Culturally, heavy work burden is part of the socialization of girls into proper womanhood. They become women within the context of role patterns constructed by a patriarchal society, where household work is allocated to women.

Girl child labour within the household eases women's work load (Bradley, 1993). Adult women education and employment increases the pressure on girl children to work and to undertake tasks beyond their capacity. The birth of a new baby adds to the work load of girls within the household. The older female child cares for infants and younger ones, cook, fetch water, wash clothes and undertake most of the tasks of their nursing mothers (Reynolds, 1991). Mothers themselves contribute to the work burden of girl children. In most households, mothers frequently discipline their female children to work by beatings. Given this situation, child labour in the family is mainly the problem of girl's labour.

Most house girls work in a non-parent family monitoring structure. Andvig (1998) argued that child labour within a non-parents' household is a major social issue in Africa. Most of these households are oppressive systems. Child domestic servants work for extremely long periods of time daily for low and often uncertain payment. In the case of younger girls, the payments are made directly to the parents on behalf of the working

child. Thus, remuneration for the child's work becomes a means of improving the living condition of the family back in the village.

Studies (Bwibo and Onyango, 1987; Andvig, 1998) indicated that the employment contracts of house girls are often short due to low degree of trust. Mistresses fear that their house girls will snatch their husbands or steal from them. A quick turnover of house girls is, therefore, reckoned a wise strategy (Andvig, 1998). But this renders the market for domestic work very fortuitous and uncertain. Paradoxically, the transient nature of domestic work contracts and the exploitative work house girls are subjected to fosters a low degree of loyalty that makes frequent stealing legitimate and profitable.

### **3. Materials and Methods**

#### **The Study Area**

The study was conducted among households in Uyo, the administrative capital of Akwa Ibom State, Nigeria. The area lies between latitudes 5° 05' North and longitude 8° East, within the equatorial rain forest belt. The city has grown tremendously within the past couple of decades, attracting people from different ethnic nationalities within the country. According to figures from the 2006 national census, Uyo has an estimated population of 309, 573. The traditional occupations of Uyo people are commerce and farming, the latter involving the cultivation of food crops such as yam, plantain, banana, maize, cassava and vegetables. However, the fast pace of urbanization in the area has brought about the growth of modern occupational activities such as banking, cottage industry and white collar jobs, which refers to a variety of low-level office, administrative, or salaried positions mostly in the civil service.

Poverty level in Uyo is high. A survey (FERT, 2004) found that over a third of the population live below the national poverty line. Access to basic social amenities such as healthcare services, electricity, housing and safe drinking water are limited. School enrolment rate of children has remained low, despite significant gains from the Free and Compulsory Education Programme of the present government. On the other hand, school drop-out rate is considered to have increased as a growing number of children leave schooling in order to work and supplement the family's meagre income. There has been noticeable decline in the living conditions of households in the city in recent times. Most children have dropped out of school due to their parents' inability to pay their tuition fees or provide them with requisite learning materials such as school uniforms and text books. The bulk of these children roam the streets hawking food items and other wares to raise money for the up-keep of the family. This condition not only perpetuates the incidence of poverty, but also exposes these children to exploitation and abuse.

Children undertake various economic activities, including factory work, street hawking, store-keeping, motor-park touting, waste collection and domestic labour. A combination of socio-cultural practices such as primogeniture and the preference for male child education collude to predispose girl children to domestic work in the city. Furthermore, female children are socialized to be docile and subservient, and to value domestic and reproductive labour, traits that make them amenable to domestic work. Male children, on the other hand, are socialized to be aggressive, assertive and courageous risk-takers, and this makes them functional in risky occupations such as industrial labour. The prevalence of harmful child labour in the city has been attributed to household poverty, high level of unemployment, child fostering, marital dissolution and orphan-hood.

## **Study Participants**

Participants were selected through multi-stage sampling method (Barker, 2005). The city was divided into six large enumeration zones (EZs) based on existing municipal divisions. Two of the EZs were purposively selected and households therein were grouped together to form sampling clusters. Snowball sampling method was used to select a predetermined number of households with female child labourers within each cluster. Snowball sampling technique is a chain referral sampling method that yields a study sample through referrals made among people who share or know people who possess some characteristics that are of research interest (Biernacki and Waldorf, 1981). It is useful in sampling 'hidden populations' who lack adequate lists or comprehensive sampling frames, and is uniquely suited for social scientific research because it allows for the sampling of 'natural interactional units' (Faugier and Sargeant, 1996). Altogether, 107 households were selected. The heads of these households were then contacted and their permission obtained to interview their female domestic servant(s). Ninety eight (98) domestic child workers were interviewed, as the heads of 9 households declined participation in the research. This puts the participation rate at 91%. A 'child domestic labourer' was defined as a prepubescent girl aged 14 and under, who works as a domestic servant in a non-relative household. Interviews were arranged in advance, in line with the schedule of each participant as confirmed by the head of the households. Other members of the household, including the household head, were not allowed to be present during the interviews so as to prevent the possibility of interference with the interview process. All interviews took place in the home where the participants were working. Participants gave informed consent to be interviewed having been guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality.

## **Data Collection and Analysis**

Interviews were conducted in Ibibio language by 4 well-trained fieldworkers, and lasted for 6 months (March to August, 2014). The research instrument was a semi-structured, individual interview schedule assessed independently by 2 experts from the local university. Interviews were recorded with an electronic device and latter transcribed and translated into English language. Fieldwork generated a stout body of narratives containing multiple representations of the economy of domestic servility. Since culture concepts are relative, the study focuses on context-specific conclusions, rather than phony generalisations which have little validity across cultural contexts (Nyamnjoh, 2005). Analysis picked out segments of the narratives in which participants expressed views on how they were recruited for domestic work in the city, the conditions under which they work and how they cope with exploitations and abuses. Repeated reading of the transcripts enhanced immersion in the data (Burnard, 1991). A thematic analysis was performed in line with the data reduction, display and verification procedure (Miles and Huberman, 1994), involving thorough examination of the narratives fitted into analysis matrixes. Themes and patterns emerging from content analysis of the memos were marked. The themes were further refined through the development of sub-themes and their properties. This process continued until the point of analytic saturation was reached. Key comments are quoted verbatim to show participants view of key issues.

#### 4. Findings and Discussion

##### Rural Poverty, Social Network and Domestic Work

The key reason why the girls were brought to the city was to escape poverty in the rural context. Their accounts reveal that they perceived life in the village as precarious and hopeless. Their parents also felt that staying in the village will condemn them to poverty so they gave consent to their movement to the city. This confirms the high level of poverty in Nigerian cities, including the study area. For example, about 74% of Nigerian rural dwellers live below the poverty line. They experience persistent scarcity of such basic social amenities as electricity, water supply, and healthcare services. Rural dwellers rely mostly on agriculture for food and income. Rural farmers provide about 90% of Nigeria's food from rain-fed agricultural system and small plots of land, less than one hectare. Population growth and development projects has mounted significant pressure on available land in rural areas, leading to decline in agricultural productivity and food security (Udoh, 1999).

The house girls made repeated references to the impoverishing effect of rural life. They spoke of suffering hunger and going several days without adequate food. It was also observed that labourious farm work has taken a toll on their health, making some of them to appear older than their actual age. While their parents acknowledged that they were too young to perform hard work, they had little option since most of the capable young men of the households had fled to the city in search of better conditions of living. Most of these girls had dropped out of school before coming to the city. They generally characterized rural life as 'poor', 'hopeless', and 'difficult'. We were told:

*I was brought to the town to work as a house girl. I couldn't go to school in the village because there was no money. My father could not pay my school fees when I started secondary school, so by the end of the first term I stopped attending classes. Even food was a problem. We used to eat only once or twice in a day, and that is after we've gone to the farm to gather some food items. So my father said that his relation should take me to the city. My elder sister stays with someone in Port Harcourt while I am here because of my father's distant relation.*

The decision to send the girls to work in the city was informed by comparison of life in the village to that of the city. According to the literature on rural-urban migration, the imbalance between rural and urban economic opportunities is the key factor driving rural-urban migration (Gugler and Flanagan, 1978). The poor living conditions of the village 'pushed' the parents of these house girls to send them out to find work in the city because of the prospects for improvement in livelihood conditions associated with the city. This is, however, not a case of migration, but of the supply of child labour to the urban domestic work sector.

The dynamics of supply of female children to urban domestic labour shows how household structure influences decisions regarding child welfare. Children's engagement in urban domestic work is largely a family decision, and may well be a poor household's strategy for raising their children and for coping with adverse socio-economic conditions. This also shows that poor rural households are not passive in the face of declining conditions of living. By facilitating and supporting the movement of their children to the city for domestic work, they demonstrate their capacity to maneuver adverse conditions. Movement to the city for work is mediated by relatives or intermediaries who source for children in villages for urban households, underscoring the role of social networks in the supply of domestic workers for urban households.



### **Abuse and Exploitation of House Girls in Domestic Work**

Experiences of exploitation and abuse were common in the accounts of the girls. They told us that their wages were negotiated with their parents before they started work, and are payable in cash or kind. Cash rewards are usually paid directly to the parent of the child. It was observed that most parents use the wages paid to them for the up-keep of the household. Rewards in kind consist mostly of educational support or starting an income generating activity for the child at the completion of the agreed period of service with her benefactors. Most domestic child workers were rewarded in cash, because this mode of payment was preferred by their parents.

Most of the girls reported that their benefactors have violated the agreement they made regarding their wages. The key reason for this violation was perceived inefficiency of the house girls. They reported that their mistresses say that they are negligent, lazy, and wasteful. The mistresses felt that the girls have not worked hard enough to deserve the wages. House girls were also accused of deliberate indolence, sabotage and failure to live up to expectations or justify investments made in their lives. We were told:

*My madam has refused to pay me my wages for three months. When my aunty asked her for my money, she said she was not going to pay me because I did nothing to earn the money. She called me all manner of names and accused me of everything. She said I am sluggish, irresponsible, negligent and stupid.*

Others reported that their mistresses have not kept their promise of sending them to school, even though they've worked for them for many years. They expressed frustration and disappointments with their conditions. Only a few of the girls (32%) said they have been paid their wages consistently. Those who have not been paid felt that they were victimized because they are not biological children of their mistresses. Others said they were cheated because their mistresses know that there is nobody to fight for them. The tender age of most house girls' and distance from relatives were clearly implicated in their exploitation in urban domestic labour.

House girls are made to perform tasks that are beyond their capacity, including fetching water from boreholes located several Kilometers away from the residence. Some of the house girls reported hawking perishable food items on the streets for their mistresses. They also cook meals, wash clothes, and trek long distances to the market to buy food stuffs, risking accidents due to their inexperience in navigating voluminous vehicular traffic in the city. They also suffer physical abuses, including floggings, slaps, pulling of the ear lobe, and knocks on the head. Some have been deprived food and other provisions by their mistresses.

Child abuse undermines the physical, psychological and sexual well-being of children (Ike and Twumasi-Ankrah, 1999). Most maltreated children develop substantial problems that will affect their social, emotional, and physical development (Putnam, 2003; 2006). As adults, they will experience far greater problems with mental illness, substance abuse, and poor physical health than their non-abused peers (ibid). Depression is at least 3 to 5 times more common in individuals with histories of child mal-treatment (Edward *et al.*, 2003). Adverse childhood experiences increases individuals' risk of developing chronic medical conditions such as heart and cardiovascular disease, and of dying at a younger age than someone without these experiences. Although these medical conditions are not direct result of abuse, they stem from the dysfunctional and addictive behaviours to which most child abuse survivors are predisposed (Putnam, 2006).

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### **Coping with Exploitation and Abuses in Domestic Work**

The girls adopt different strategies to cope with the exploitation and abuses they experience, depending on the extent of abuse or exploitation they experience, their income, and the social network they have in the city. Some house girls endure abusive treatment until, in their words, 'it gets out of hand'. Some tolerate their mistresses in the hope that they will change with time. One of the girls told us how her vindictive mistress has changed over time, but not without occasional outbursts of anger. We were told:

*My madam has changed. She is really good to me now, unlike before. But she can be very harsh from time to time. The other day, she refused to give me food. But she later changed her mind and gave me. I think she will really change.*

The girls' tolerant attitude towards their mistresses was motivated by their religious faith. Most of them stated that they believed that God will change their mistresses' attitude towards them. Others cope by meeting their own needs with the financial savings they've made. One house girl told us that she keeps some money with a neighbour so that she can return back to the village. In her words, "I am saving some money. When I have enough I will go back to the village".

Urban house girls drew on networks of social relationships to mitigate abuses and exploitations. Mention was made of help rendered by sympathetic neighbours in the form of food and clothes. Others were sheltered by neighbours when their benefactors drove them out of the house. Relations in the city also came to the rescue of some of the girls. Friends and church members were also mentioned as sources of support. Some girls had plans to return back to the village to resume schooling, while others wanted to move to another household to work.

### **5. Conclusion and Policy Implications**

The study explored the experiences of female domestic servants working in urban households. Sourced from rural areas, their move to the city for work as a means of survival was facilitated by social networks. While urban domestic employment promises a means of escape from rural poverty and presents opportunities for education and improved living conditions, it also exposes house girls to abuses and exploitations. The house girls tolerated their mistresses, obtained support from neighbours, relatives, friends and church members, made financial savings to support themselves, and sought to return to the village. Domestic labour is a major social problem arising from poverty, which puts pressure on the children to support the family by supplying labour to urban households. Their inability to assess and confront the risks involved realistically makes intervention expedient. The Child Rights Bill, which passed into law by the Akwa Ibom State House of Assembly, should be efficiently enforced. Free and compulsory education programme for children should also be given broad-based implementation in order to provide a viable alternative to child labour as well as enhance their prospects of gainful future employment. Intervention programmes should seek to discourage the supply of children as domestic servants in cities, while promoting community support for basic education, especially for female children. Poverty alleviation programmes should be mounted to improve rural livelihood and render child labour unviable. Finally, since female child labourers are at grave risks of sexual abuse and trafficking for prostitution, welfare support programmes should be tailored to their social, economic, educational and health needs.

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