

Poverty and the Political Economy of Baby Merchandizing in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

The correlation between poverty and societal ills is underscored in the myriads of evils plaguing human societies including Nigeria. One of such ills, baby trading, that had hitherto been tagged a taboo in Nigeria especially among the Yorubas, in the South-West, is beginning to fade away. The high level of poverty among Nigerians culminating in the feminization of poverty has dealt a dastard blow to human dignity especially that of women. This is to the effect that mothers that were hitherto the 'treasured gold' have become the agents in the hands of social marauders conniving with their male folk to perpetuate the act of commoditizing babies contrary to the prevailing belief that babies were heavenly treasures that are given mainly by God and can never be commoditized. Thus, in recent times one is inundated with stories of women trading in babies for pecuniary gain occasioned merely by poverty, wants and societal decay. Such decadence is heightened by the level of underdevelopment in the country which have thrown up a lot of challenges for the citizens and opened a bizarre of activities that are deleterious not only to the development of the state but have been damaging to its sustainability as a corporate entity. Utilizing secondary and primary data, the paper discusses the insidious problem of baby trading and its implications on crave for development in Nigeria. It concludes that barring divine intervention the menace will continue unabated unless government intervenes by cushion the effects of corruption on Nigerians, judiciously and fairly redistribute the commonwealth and economically empowered the citizens, especially the womenfolk, towards national development.

Key words: poverty, feminization of poverty, baby merchandizing, corruption and development

INTRODUCTION

Poverty is among the greatest threat to human security. Although the total global economic pie is growing, now exceeding \$70 trillion a year, its distribution is uneven, with 2.54 billion of the world's 6.8 billion people subsisting on less than \$2 a day (World Bank 2010). The poorest 40 percent of the world's population account for 5 percent of global income, while the wealthiest 20 percent receive three quarters of world income (UN 2007). In Nigeria, an estimated 126 million out of the country's 168.8million (as estimated in 2012) people live on less than **N220.00** or USD1.25 per day. The enormous wealth in the country has not impacted positively on the well-being of the citizens. (<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL;Sen, 2010>). Despite the average GDP per capita, for a developing African nation, much of the Nigeria's population suffers from extreme poverty. Nigeria ranked 151 out of 177 countries in the United Nations Development Index in 2004. Nigeria was ranked 158th on

the United Nations' Human Poverty Index and over 50% of the population are living below \$1 per day. In 2010, Nigeria ranked 159th out of 177 countries in Human Development Index (Odularu, 2008:3; Ogunkua 2011). The disparity between GDP per capita and the number of people living below \$1 per day illustrates the enormous income gap in the country. Available data from the Harmonized Nigeria Living Standard Survey (HNLSS) 2009/2010, which remains the follow-up to the Nigeria Living Standard Survey (NLSS) 2003/2004, conducted by the NBS (National Bureau of Statistics) reveals that efforts to alleviate poverty was not satisfactory. For instance, relative poverty and absolute poverty rates increased to 69.0% and 60.9% in 2010 respectively from 54.4% and 54.7% in 2004 (2011 Annual Performance Report:38). According to the National Bureau of Statistics, 112.519 million Nigerians live in relative poverty conditions while other poverty measurement standard, absolute measure, which puts the country's poverty rate at 99.284 million or 60.9 per cent (Onuba, 2012).

Despite the massive revenue from oil, 69 percent of over 100 million Nigerians were living within the poverty bracket. Nigeria had been unable to translate the huge natural resources at her disposal to the improvement of her citizens' living standard. According to the former World Bank Vice President and a former Minister for Education, Ezekwesili (cited in *The Punch*, 2013), "Nigeria has therefore tragically failed to translate her rich resource endowment to improvement in the standard of living of her citizens hence we today have 69 percent of over 100 million of our citizens in the poverty bracket ". The rising level of poverty in the country has been attributed to poor governance. Evidence of terribly poor governance in Nigeria is palpable. It manifested in the corrupt, inept political leadership and weak civil institutions to dilapidated infrastructure, insecurity and mass poverty in the midst of opulence (www.punchng.com/editorial/reversing-poor-governance-and-poverty/). Ezekwesili (*The Punch*, 2013) submitted that Nigeria is the best known example of the African paradox of a land so rich in natural resources, but where the majority of the people are poor. She located the source of the mass poverty in poor governance, she recalled how corruption and economic mismanagement have condemned 69 per cent of the populace to poverty, while the Asian economies have galloped ahead (*The Punch*, 2013). "Over 80 million Nigerians live in poverty and are affected in one way or the other by the current humanitarian crisis. Available reports indicate that there are over 3.3 million Internally Displaced Persons, IDPs, which is Africa's largest, ranking behind Syria and Columbia on a global scale.

Amidst this scenario of a world so rich yet remains so poor is the tragedy and precarious situation of women globally that have been so hit by the biting effect of poverty to the extent that feminization of poverty has assumed a frontal stage in women's discourse across the globe. In the particular case of Nigeria, the poorly managed economy coupled with the global economic crunch has aggravated women's poverty to such an extent that they now engage in social menaces and atrocities like prostitution, kidnapping, armed robbery, child trafficking, domestic violence against spouse and lately baby trading reflecting in the commoditization of baby for pecuniary gains and advantages towards assuaging the biting economic effects thus jettisoning the pride of motherhood whose parental value is unquantifiable.

The increasing incidence of young, pregnant and helpless adolescent girls and poverty-stricken pregnant women being lured into giving away their babies after delivery for financial remuneration have labelled Nigerian society as one with most dehumanizing form of child abuse, women sexual assault and trafficking. Charles, Akwara and Andeshi (2014) found that abject poverty is the primary motivation that is propelling mothers in the baby factories to give out their babies for money; most of those in baby factories are educationally challenged and were unable to complete secondary school education; most girls or women having failed in their petty businesses and needful of money to restart another businesses or start a vocation

or to complete secondary school education. They also found that greed is one of the main motivating factors for the phenomenon of baby factories in Nigeria; and very few people purchase babies from baby factories in Nigeria for rituals; some of the buyers of the babies resell them for profit to mostly people living in the Diaspora; and most of the buyers of the babies are women who are barren and have issues in their marriage. For Charles, Akwara and Andeshi, it appears women living in the cities of Abuja, Lagos and the south-south region of Nigeria are the major consumers of the numerous products of the baby factories situated in the south-eastern part of the country. UNESCO (2006) had earlier identified poverty, perversion of cultural traditions, and manipulation of religious rituals, harmful cultural and social realities as some of the root causes of baby factories in Nigeria. Huntley (2013) emphasized that among the root causes of the phenomenon of Nigerian baby factories may be those that facilitate any other forms of human trafficking such as low levels of education, illiteracy and lack of information on human trafficking. The main purpose of this study is therefore to investigate the correlations between poverty and women's illicit trading in babies in Nigeria with a view to suggesting policy options and alternatives towards curtailing the menace.

CONCEPTUALIZING BABY MERCHANDIZING

This is a form of child/Human trafficking that is fast gaining ascendancy in crime and human trafficking in Nigeria. Baby Merchandizing refers to the scenario of commoditizing human beings for pecuniary or monetary gains. The practice usually emanates as proceeds from the baby factories where such babies are conceived, nurtured and delivered for eventual sale to prospective buyers who determine the fate of such babies. There is no legal definition for this phenomenon in Nigeria however, this term is used here to describe criminal confinement of girls/ladies in to a place or factory where men are hired to impregnate them and from where they are paid off upon successful deliverance of their babies. It refers to the illegal act of buying and selling babies like every other commodity at the market or supermarkets. Most ladies that are involved take to this out of poverty and desperation to survive rather than being forced.

Based on media reports, baby trading thrives in the South-East of Nigeria, in particular, the States of Anambra, Lagos, Abia, Imo, Enugu and Ebonyi. The menace if unchecked is capable of engulfing the whole country as it has transcended the original states to embracing almost every region in Nigeria.

The first cases of "baby harvesting" in Nigeria were officially reported in 2006 by UNESCO. It specifically referred to three Nigerian States: Abia, Ebonyi and Lagos. The detected cases had a similar fact pattern. Pregnant teenagers or adult women with unwanted pregnancies approached doctors, clinics, nurses or orphanages that subsequently took care of these girls and women during their pregnancies. When babies were born they were sold to couples. The natural mothers of the babies signed papers repudiating their claims on the babies and received monetary compensation. UNESCO neither revealed any evidence showing how exactly babies were used upon their sale to a third party, nor reported any trace of exploitation of pregnant women and young girls as well as their babies. Therefore, it is rather doubtful that these cases could be considered to be human trafficking. At a minimum, they would constitute crimes such as the illegal adoption or sale of children.

Since 2006 "baby harvesting" in Nigeria has taken a more dangerous and complex form involving human trafficking alongside other illegal activities. For example, according to recent mass media reports, teenage girls and young women are brought by traffickers to the so-called "baby factories" with false promises of jobs or safe abortions. As a result, they are confined and forced to give birth. Some of the victims are trafficked while being pregnant; others are later

impregnated by men specially hired for such purposes. Allegedly, their babies are sold for international or domestic adoption, rituals, slave labour or sexual exploitation.

According to these reports women and girls are lured into such “factories” through deception and abuse of their vulnerability. Thus, traffickers usually approach their victims with false promises of jobs or safe abortions. There are at least two factors that make these victims vulnerable: being children (most victims are still teenagers) or being pregnant out of wedlock, which carries a social stigma in Nigeria. Girls and women are locked up at facilities used as “baby factories,” allowing their traffickers to establish control over them and hold them until they give birth to babies that are subsequently sold to third parties. Those victims who are not pregnant upon their arrival at the “baby factory” are forcibly impregnated there; with some of them being held at the facility for extended periods and repeatedly impregnated. Though babies are mostly sold for the purposes of adoption, they are also allegedly used for sacrifices in black magic rituals, the sex trade, and manual labour upon their sale to third parties.

POVERTY AND BABY MERCHANDIZING IN NIGERIA; A CORRELATIONAL ANALYSIS

Nigeria, with a population of over 175 million, is the most populous nation in Africa and the seventh most populous in the world. Her population will be approximately 200 million by 2019 and over 400 million by 2050, becoming one of the top five populous countries in the world. Nigeria is one of the poorest and most unequal countries in the world, with over 80 million or 64% of her population living below poverty line. The situation has not changed over the decades, but is increasing. Poverty and hunger have remained high in rural areas, remote communities and among female-headed households and these cut across the six geo-political zones, with prevalence ranging from approximately 46.9 percent in the South West to 74.3 percent in North West and North East. “In Nigeria, 37% of children under five years old were stunted, 18 percent wasted, 29% underweight and overall, only 10% of children aged 6-23 months are fed appropriately based on recommended infant and young children feeding practices. Over 80 million Nigerians live in poverty and are affected in one way or the other by the current humanitarian crisis. Available reports indicate that there are over 3.3 million Internally Displaced Persons, IDPs, which is Africa’s largest, ranking behind Syria and Columbia on a global scale (Ujumadu 2016). There is no doubt that poverty is one of the root causes of the women problem especially in Africa and the third world. Certainly, a society that had for long neglected the proper education and economic empowerment of women had wittingly or unwittingly ensured that her women fold is kept in the dark economically and otherwise. Broom and Selznick (1973:174) observe thus:

The economic status of women is a special case because their prestige and authority are... seen as a by-product of the achievement of their husbands, because their position in the labour force is ambiguous and intermittent.

In other words, men control, dominate, and distribute the earth’s resources according to their fancies. While women make up about 50 percent of the world’s population, they earn only one tenth of the world’s income and own less than one percent of property (MDGs, 2004/5: 2-5). One percent of the world’s property is registered in their names. Osarenren (1993:90) observes that in Sub-Saharan Africa, only 47 percent of women aged 15 and above are economically active compared to the 85 percent among the men folk. Therefore, in the light of poor financial strength, women are really relegated to associate positions.

Media reports shows that the prevalence of baby factory has become very rampant in Nigeria to an extent that merits serious attention. For instance, in 2007, nineteen girls were rescued from a cartel in Rivers state. In 2008 network of baby factories claiming to be orphanages were revealed in Enugu state and seven teenagers were rescued in Enugu town and another thirteen

girls were rescued from an eighty-year-old woman in the same Enugu state (Ahaoma, 2014). In 2009 over six baby factories were sealed with hundreds of pregnant young girls released in Abia state. Between January and March 2010 over seventy-seven teenage girls were also rescued in Abia state. Between May and June 2011 thirty-two pregnant girls, whose babies were on the sales list ranging between N25, 000.00 (up to \$135.14) and N30, 000.00 (up to \$162.16) were rescued from an illegal facility in Abia state. Fourteen pregnant girls were also rescued from a childcare home forty-two others rescued from a charity centre both in Abia state. In 2011 the police also raided two hospitals and dismantled two baby factories in Enugu State. In October 2011 seventeen pregnant teenagers were reported to have been freed from a sachet water production factory which was being used as an illegal baby harvesting facility in Anambra state. In April 2012 a town (Ihiala) that harboured a baby factory in Anambra state was also uncovered by Nigeria policemen (Ahaoma, 2014; Madike, 2013b). In May 2013 about twenty-six teenage girls were rescued by the police from a woman who operates a baby factory disguised as maternity home and a drinking water factory in the remote village of Umuaka in Imo state (Njoku, 2013). In the same month of May 2013 the Imo state Police Command rescued seventeen pregnant teenagers from a syndicate in Njaba local government area of the state. The police saved eleven babies waiting to be sold out. A young man who confessed to being the person responsible for impregnating the girls was arrested during the raid. In Akwa Ibom state, two baby factories housing seven pregnant teenagers and eight pregnant women respectively were discovered by the police and the victims rescued. Among the girls arrested was a 16-year old teenager who was promised some money to abandon her baby after delivery. Her baby was meant to be sold for N300, 000.00 (up to \$1,621).

The department of state security in Akwa Ibom state of Nigeria reports that over sixty children have been sold in the state though the alleged baby trader said he could not remember the number of babies he had sold. More than twenty (20) children were rescued in the special operation by security men. At Owerri in Imo state, a man was alleged to have paid N900, 000.00 (up to \$4, 864) to buy two boys (ages 3 and 4 years) from a baby trader. A medical doctor was arrested in Owerri, Imo state for operating a baby factory with sixteen pregnant girls in his compound. In January 2014, the Nigeria Immigration Service in Ondo state uncovered a baby factory syndicate at Ilu Tuntun in Okitipupa local government area arresting no fewer than twenty-four suspects during the raid. Also, eight pregnant girls were set free in Ogun state where another baby factory was discovered in Akute near Ifo (Ajayi, 2014). Earlier, 2012 report by Campaign for Democracy, a civil society organisation shows that the number of rescued cases of baby factory stood at 2500 with Imo and Abia states topping the list (Ahaoma, 2014; Information Nigeria, 2014). This is an indication that up till now, baby factory are still prevalent in Nigeria.

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causes of baby factories in Nigeria. Huntley (2013) emphasized that among the root causes of the phenomenon of Nigerian baby factories may be those that facilitate any other forms of human trafficking such as low levels of education, illiteracy and lack of information on human trafficking.

It has been noted, with respect to the rural women, that they, 'bear excessive burden in fetching and carrying water and wood for fuel, in hoeing and weeding, harvesting, transporting, storing and food processing ... (they) are the most disadvantaged people in the world. They undertake three-quarters of all agricultural work in addition to their domestic responsibilities (UNDP, 1997:61-62). Even when women secure employment in the formal sector, they have to contend with the challenge of balancing their family responsibilities with their official duties and with other covert and overt acts of discrimination and sexual harassment (Enemuo op. cit).

Studies have indicated that women suffer poverty on a more widespread basis than men, and that their experience of poverty is quite different because of expectations about gender roles. Thus, the term 'feminization of poverty' is sometimes used to denote the propositions that more women are likely to experience poverty as poverty levels increase, that women stand a greater risk of poverty than men and that there are specific impact of poverty on women (Alcook 1993:122).

The present economic recession in Nigeria has been having its toll on the average individual. The global economic recession has further pauperized the women. It has heightened their level of poverty. The effects have been diverse, extensive, and saddening. Poverty and hunger have contributed significantly to extensive breakdown in social order, resulting in vices such as robbery, internet crimes (a.k.a 419), Niger Delta crisis, hard drug business, corruption at various levels, criminal vices; kidnapping and assassinations, examination malpractices, suicide, prostitution and murder (Aderibigbe, 2011:10). Thus the hitherto feminization of poverty has been worsened to the extent that it is now far from exaggeration to equate women with poverty. Gender inequalities play a key role in the persistent poverty levels of women in Nigeria (Oke 2010:81). According to the *African Economic Outlook* (African Development Bank-AfDB, 2009), the prevailing global economic crisis has seriously affected African economies with GDP growth falling by more than half from a projected 5.7% to 2.8% in 2009. The report indicates that the crisis has diminished consistent economic growth recorded by many African countries (Nigeria inclusive) in the past five years. It predicts that due to the recession, the continent can expect only 2.8 % growth in 2009, less than half of the 5.7% expected before the crisis (Moyo 2010:38). Under this situation, women are mainly affected.

CURTAILING BABY MERCHANDIZING IN NIGERIA

The menace of baby merchandizing thrives on societal ills and governmental insensitivity and negligence in providing the basic necessities for the citizenry. In the particular case of Nigeria, governmental failure has largely responsible for this incipient evil that has permeated every region of the country. Towards curtailing this inhuman practice, the following suggestions are made:

(1) Poverty alleviation/eradication: The major challenges Nigeria is currently facing that constrain her economic growth and social development are lack of good governance, general increased insecurity across geo-political zones in North East, Niger Delta and Lake Chad region in particular. The situation is exacerbated by the existence of systematic accountability challenges, limited capacities of independent institutions/commissions and limited accountability at the federal, states and local government levels. Nigeria is a deeply divided society considering the plurality of ethnic, religious and regional identities that define her

political existence (Ujumadu, 2016). Governments at all level should strive to eradicate poverty that breeds illegalities in the body polity. Eradicating poverty will drastically curtail the menace of baby trading and commoditization since it is established in the literature that poverty is one of the root causes of baby trading.

(2) Provision of employment opportunity for the jobless: Youth unemployment which is 42% in 2016 is very high, creating poverty, helplessness, despair and easy target for crime and terrorism (ibid.). It is said that an idle hand is the devil's workshop, providing jobs for the jobless, especially the youth, will reduce social menaces and herald overall development of the country.

(3) Legislating and enforcing compulsory primary and secondary school education for the girls/female gender: Findings of the study reveal that both the educated and illiterate Nigerians are culpable in fostering the prevalence of baby trading in Nigeria with the highest concentration among the illiterates and the semi-literate.. Over 10 million children of school age are out of schools with no knowledge and skills (ibid.). To this end, aggressive education is imperative for the female gender that has become the conduit pipe facilitating this illegal business towards ameliorating this scourge. This is premised upon the fact that education is pivotal to healthy personal and social living. Adequate counselling intervention is needed in this direction and efforts must be geared towards initiating and implementing a proactive counselling intervention programme at individual and community levels to surmount the Nigerian baby trading and commoditization phenomenon.

(4)Government should criminalize corruption within the body polity: the law enforcement agents, judges as well as the entire citizens should be purge of corruption and corrupt tendencies. Corruption should be wiped out in all facets of governance. Wiping out corruption will ensure that resources are available to cater for the need of the citizens and most Nigerians will have legal means of sustenance rather than resulting to illicit practice of baby trading

(5)Government should canvass cultural reorientation towards downplaying social stigma and cultural stigmatization usually meted out to impregnated young girls or women with pregnancy outside wedlock: Here there can be legislation towards reintegrating such ladies into the society. Social stigmas that contribute to the existence of "baby factories" in Nigeria are those against teenage pregnancies, pregnancies out of wedlock, couples' infertility and legal adoptions. The first two help ensure that there is an abundant supply of women, teenage girls, and their new-borns at such "baby factories." The last two help to promote demand for such babies, since "adoptive" parents pass off these babies for their biological infants to avoid cultural and societal disapproval (Huntley 2013).

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

Nigeria has ratified or acceded to most of the important international instruments fighting human trafficking and protecting women and children. Among them are the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organised Crime (2000) and the Palermo Protocol (2000), the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the Optional Protocol to it on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution, and Child Pornography (2000), the ICC Statute (2002), Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (1979) and the Optional Protocol to it (1999), the International Labour Organisation Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999), and the United Nations Supplementary Convention on the Abolition of Slavery, the Slave Trade, and Institutions and Practices Similar to Slavery (1956).

As a State Party to these treaties Nigeria undertook, *inter alia*, to take legislative and other appropriate measures to criminalize trafficking in persons and the sale of children including for the purpose of illegal adoption, to prevent and combat the abduction of children, illicit transfer and non-return of children abroad, to protect children and women from economic exploitation, sexual exploitation, sexual abuse and any other form of exploitation, to ensure that children are not separated from their parents against their will, to design and implement programs to eliminate the sale, trafficking and forced labour of children. Meanwhile, Nigeria has neither signed nor ratified Hague Convention No.33 on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in Respect of Inter-country Adoption (1993), which aims, *inter alia*, to prevent the abduction, sale of children and child trafficking and to establish transparent mechanisms for interstate adoptions. This fact may partly explain the lack of adequate policies and legislation on the adoption process in Nigeria. At the regional level Nigeria is a party to the following treaties related to human trafficking: the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (1982), the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003). These regional treaties reinforce Nigeria's duties stipulated by the international instruments fighting human trafficking, in particular: to protect women and children from all forms of abuse and exploitation, to combat trafficking in women and children, and to prevent abduction of children and their separation from parents against their will. According to the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (*the Constitution*), any treaty will be enforceable in Nigeria only if it is passed into law by the National Assembly (Nigerian Parliament). To date Nigeria enacted the following laws combating human trafficking: Trafficking in Persons (prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act 2003 and Child Rights Act 2003. Various aspects of human trafficking are also covered by Nigerian Criminal and Penal Codes. Further, the Nigerian supreme law, the Constitution, prohibits slavery, servitude, inhuman or degrading treatment, and forced labour. These measures will only be effective with strong governmental and political will to criminalizing baby trading as well as stamping out corruption that is the harbinger of all evils in Nigeria.

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers conclude that both the educated and illiterate Nigeria citizens are cohorts in fostering the prevalence of baby factory in Nigeria. This has made it to seem as if the sole purpose of education in Nigeria has been defeated. To ameliorate this scourge, adequate counselling intervention is needed in this direction and efforts must be geared towards initiating and implementing a proactive counselling intervention programme at individual and community levels to surmount the Nigerian baby factory phenomenon.

In the light of the above expositions, the following recommendations are also made:

1. Government and NGOs must partner at this time to put adequate measures in place to empower the youths by creating functional employment and free skill acquisition opportunities as a way of alleviating poverty.
2. Various state governments should intensify their efforts at creating jobs for the teeming youths, especially for vulnerable adolescent females who are easily lured into the illicit trade due to hardship.
3. State government should collaborate with international agencies to create a child friendly environment to surmount the baby factory scourge and take pre-emptive actions against the culprits. Child life protection Act should be made to prohibit and punish persons caught in the sale of babies in Nigeria under any guise as well as protect the rights of children from conception to birth and not just those children that have been delivered of.

4. Enlightenment campaigns to overcome the Nigeria baby factory phenomenon and make each state fit for a child should be championed by all stakeholders from all walks of life with all sincerity, commitment, and enthusiasm.
5. Centre for counselling and human development should be set up and funded for the effective training and retraining of guidance counsellors who could assist in surmounting this illicit trade through community counselling interventions.

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