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**ECONOMIC ACQUISITION
AND CHILD LABOUR IN RIVERS STATE,
NIGERIA: LET THE BIBLE RESPOND**

Introduction

Economic acquisition and child labour are two concepts that affect the social, economic, religious and political well-being of a person, both individually and collectively. Economic acquisition is the act of getting or increasing the means of production, resources, income and trade for one's benefit. It can be achieved through illegal means such as greed, materialism, exploitation among others. Thus, any material acquisition of wealth devoid of spiritual or moral consideration is unsavory, unacceptable and not recognized. This has been the present situation of things in Nigeria. Anigbogu affirms that:

Presently, many Nigerians forgo the spiritual values emphasizing material wealth, glorify and worship it at the expense of the spiritual aspect of man. They think that one without money is dumped as totally useless and irrelevant. This is why evils of all descriptions abound in Nigeria. Most Nigerians want to amass wealth, achieve success, become recognized, relevant and possibly worshipped.

The highly cherished varies of the people no longer count in the unbridled chase for primitive accumulation of money, success and power.¹

Child labour is the negative result of economic acquisition. It is work performed by children that either endanger their health, education, or keeps them from play and other activities important to their development. Hornby defined economic "as connected with the trade, industry and development of wealth of a country, an area or a society".² He further defined acquisition "as the act of getting something, especially knowledge, a skill, and so on".³ Therefore economic acquisition means the act of getting or increasing means of production, resources, income and trade for one's benefit. Child labour as seen by Shorter and Onyancha is "the engagement of a child under sixteen years of age in the labour force to the detriment of his or her education, mental, intellectual, physical or moral development and social well being".⁴

Redmond opines that:

Child labour, designation formerly applied to the practice of employing young children in factories, now used to denote the employment of minors generally, especially in work that may interfere with their education or endanger their health....The use of child labour was not regarded a social problem until the introduction of the factory system.⁵

Cummings also stated that child labour is the "work performed by children that either endangers their health or safety, interferes with or prevent their education, or keeps them from play and other activity important to their development".⁶ He further stated that, child labour in this character has long been considered a social evil to be abolished.⁷ McDonald contributing to child labour said that, "child labour is the term used to refer to an economic practice and an

¹Anigbogu, P. C. *Materialism: Its manifestations in Nigeria*, 2007, p. 56

²Hornby, A S. *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English*, 1995, p.369

³Ibidem, p. 10

⁴Shorter, A. and Onyancha, E. *Street children in Africa*, 1999, p. 52

⁵Redmond, W. A. *Child labour*, 2007, p. 8

⁶Cummings, M. *The Encyclopedia Americana vol. 6*, 2001, p. 460.

⁷Ibidem, p. 460

attendant social evil".⁸ He further mentioned that yet the term cannot be given precise definition since the meanings attributed to both child and labour are relative to a given culture and social milieu.⁹ Greenhouse defines child labour as the "employment of children, often in harsh conditions and for minima pay, remains stubbornly alive throughout much of the world, in development and industrialized countries alike....A childhood of hard labour often leaves children gaunt and crippled, sickly and uneducated".¹⁰ Fada sees child labour as a form of exploitation. Therefore he stated that, "children are seen in industry, the rural area, in domestic services, the informal sector and on the streets of many cities".¹¹ Therefore, child labour is generally seen as those activities done by children who are below twenty years and is to the detriment of their health, education and development.

History of Child Labour in Rivers State

Since ancient times, children have helped their parents do housework and farming, but it was only during the Industrial Revolution at the end of the 18th century that people began to view child labour as a serious problem. Therefore, according to estimates made by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations (UN) branch that specialized in labour matters, (cited in Okoro) there are at least 250 million working children worldwide under the age of fifteen. Three-quarters of those young workers toil six or more days a week; 125 million children work nine hours or more each day. Over half the working children are in Asia, while in Africa one in three children work, and in Latin America, one in five.¹²

⁸ McDonald, W. J. *New Catholic encyclopedia vol 3*, 1967, p. 571

⁹ Ibidem, p. 572

¹⁰ Greenhouse, S. *The scourge of child labour*, 2007, p. 9

¹¹ Fada, N. M. *Some problems of the Nigerian youth: A panacea*. 2005, p. 7

¹² Okoro, A. *Child labour in the contemporary world*, 2015, p. 56

Akpobari opines that the practice of child labour has continued to flourish, fueled by poverty and the lack of access to education, in Nigeria, especially in Rivers state. The practice of child labour keeps on increasing every minute as so many school children loiter about in the major roads and streets running after vehicles in Port Harcourt and major cities in Rivers State with one kind of goods or the other to sell and get money. Some others struggle with goods on wheelbarrows and in most cases, heavier than their capacity to push about. Some of these children stand on the roads risking their lives and laboring for school fees during holidays in order to continue their education.¹³ Typically, the children work in poor conditions and have little or no choice of receiving a formal education. The meager income they earn is often necessary for their families' survival.

Danjuma opines that "In every streets in Rivers state, different sorts of child labour exists ranging from domestic servants, hawkers, child exploitation, prostitution, educational problem, poor parental training among others".¹⁴ This ill-treatment on children continues to mount as a result of high rate of abject poverty, political instability, religious intolerance and poor management of our economic resources by political leaders in the state and country at large.

Causes of Child Labour in Rivers State

Child labour is a fact of life, whether one likes it or not; It continues, to pervade the cities. Child labour has been attributed to so many factors which are responsible for its increase in our society. These are as follows;

1) **Economic Acquisition Factor:** In Nigeria, especially in Rivers State, child labour abounds as a result of some peoples' desire to acquire material possessions and wealth by all means. So many families in Rivers State, subject their children, mostly their domestic servants to hawking different kinds of go-

¹³ Akpobari, G. L. *Problems of child labour in Rivers State*, 2015. P. 89

¹⁴ Danjuma K. K.. *Child exploitation*, 2015, p. 83

ods, engagement in prostitution among others in order to increase the family's income. This practice is as a result of excessive love for money. Okolo affirms that:

Nigerian is largely drawn to things of immediate material gain, advantage or pleasure. Naturally, money is highly valued for what it does and can do. In Nigerian context, this is usually everything. The average Nigerian strongly believes that money is almighty and can achieve anything and everything. It is key to paradise on earth, to prosperity, power, social importance, even national honours, and so on. Its accumulation becomes a value, the more and even the fouler means; the better, indeed, the more powerful and important one with money is.¹⁵

He further stated that, "the love for material labour contributed to the problem of drug-peddling, currency trafficking, armed robbery and the like evils which characterize our society today".¹⁶

However, people's desire for wealth in Rivers State has rendered majority of our children homeless and helpless. These child laborers are exposed to uncountable dangers ranging from sexual abuse, drug addiction, malnourishment, diseases and so many other vices. Greenhouse asserts that, "experts agree that child labour often results in uneducated and impoverished adults who may suffer health problems caused by having worked as children".¹⁷

2) **Greed Factor:** This is one of the primary causes of child labour. Unscrupulous employers will always be tempted to hire the group of workers that is easiest to exploit; that is children. The most vulnerable and weakest workers, children can usually be paid less than adults and are considerably less likely than adults to know their rights or to protest working conditions. Ayodele avers that in Rivers State, some contractors use children below twenty years in construction of buildings and roads. These children do not know whether the wages

¹⁵ Okolo, C. B. (1993). *Education and Nigerian values: A companion for students*, p. 14

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 17

¹⁷ Greenhouse, S. *The scourge of child labour*, 2007, p. 8

paid to them are justified or not. More often than not, the condition in which these children are kept, under hard labour is dehumanizing.¹⁸

3) Poverty Factor: Poverty plays an enormous role in the phenomenon of child labour. In Rivers state, where about 70% of the population lives below the poverty line, the specter of street children is a growing one.¹⁹ Desperate for money, poor families around the State are forced to push even young children to work to increase the family's overall income. Therefore, the presence of child labour demonstrates a deeper reality of poverty experienced by many people in Nigeria, especially in Rivers State. In the past few years there has been a dramatic increase in the -level of poverty, coupled with a high degree of unemployment and a poor performance in the agricultural sector, which is the mainstay of the economy. Shorter and Onyanha stated that, "1.3billion people in the developing world survive on less than one U S dollar a day and this number continues to increase".²⁰ He continued by saying that:

Every year nearly eight million children die from diseases linked to unclean water and air pollution. Fifty million children are mentally or physically damaged by inadequate nutrition and 130 million children, 80% of them girls are denied a chance to go to school.²¹

The problem of poverty in Rivers State has been and has continued to increase child labour. Fada affirmed that, "Poverty is at the root of child labour especially when this is aggravated by unbalanced development."²² Onwuli (cited in Fada,) argues that the key to this problem is "the family, because poverty violates its rights and dignity, creating the condition for the exploitation of children" ²³

4) Educational Problem: Education is an important aspect of a child's development. It is in the responsibility of the parents to take care of their children's basic needs such as shelter, clothing, food, education and so on. So many

¹⁸ Ayodele, A. O. *Inhumanity to humans*, 2014, p. 23

¹⁹ Hannah, W. J. *Poverty in Rivers State*. p. 67

²⁰ Shorter, A. and Onyanha, E. *Street children in Africa*, 1999, p. 19

²¹ Ibidem, p. 20

²² Fada, N. M. *Some problems of the Nigerian youth: A panacea*, 2005, p. 8

²³ Ibidem, p. 8

poor parents are unable to see their children in schools as a result of the financial burden education causes in our society today. The high cost of textbooks, uniform, writing materials, exercise books, activity fee, building fee and hostel fee. Therefore, parents with children in several schools at the same time incur multiple expenses, and it is clear that children from poor families cannot afford the simplest school materials. However, the rise in the number of child laborers is directly connected with the failure of parents to make such payments and thus to keep their children in school. It is worthy to note that the majority of these child laborers are school drop-outs, who migrate to the streets, and the average street child is a drop-out, especially from lower primary education.

5) **Insecurity Factor:** The proliferation of child labour in Nigeria is also due to a growing lack of security. The cases of religious crises which occur in Nigeria daily have misplaced and uprooted so many families. Many children were uprooted and some, who were traumatized as a result of witnessing the merciless slaughter of their parents, ended up on the streets. In Rivers State, land disputes between people of different communities, crisis between the Ogoni people and the Okirika, Andoni, Ndoki, and even among themselves have resulted in the untimely death of so many people, thereby misplacing so many children and rendering them homeless. This has caused increase in child labour in the State.²⁴

6) **Child Exploitation:** This is another kind of child labour which exists within some families in Rivers State. This involves the use of domestic servants or housemaid to attain an income. These children are sometimes subjected to hawking on the street; more often than not they are sexually molested and abused by their employers and at times by the gangs on the streets.²⁵ Some of these housemaids in our society are exploited beyond human imagination that most at times they are physically deformed by their employers, may be as a result of wickedness and greed. They are most often denied their educational right and mainly they are starved for food for any slightest mistake.

²⁴ Jonah, A. J. *Insecurity in Nigeria*, 2016, p. 89

²⁵ Ibidem, p. 25

The Effect of Child Labour in Rivers State

The impact of child labour on our children is more often negative. It has resulted to so many problems such as;

1) **Prostitution:** It is one of the major effects of child labour. Some of these children who are exploited as a result of hard labour are forced or lured into commercial sex workers. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimated more than one million girls who have been lured or forced into commercial sexual exploitation. Shorter and Onyanacha stated that, "Almost all girls on the streets are actively involved in sexual relationships. These relationships are basically a form of abuse, because the girls trade sex for protection, affection or for essentials such as food, shelter and money."²⁶ Some of these prostitutes care little about the risk of HIV/AIDS and other sexual transmitted diseases (STD's).

2) **High Mortality Rate:** Most of these street children more often than not are killed through accident, ritual killing or deadly riots.²⁷ These children are not well-catered for by their parents or guardians, and this situation makes them vulnerable to different kind of ill-treatment which result to cost of their lives. Most child mortality rate is caused by the effect of child labour on the children.

3) **Juvenile Delinquency:** This is one of the effects of child labour on our children. This makes them engage in different kinds of criminal acts ranging from picking pockets, snatching bags, watches or jewelry, armed robbery, destruction of property, formation of gangs (which can be called cultism) among other vices.²⁸

4) **Lack of Medical Care:** Most of these hard laboured street children lack the necessary medical attention needed for their survival.²⁹ As a result of their being on the street most often makes them neglect their health conditions, even those one's who are conscious of their health condition are being neglected or denied the required medical - attention by their parents and guardians. Thus,

²⁶ Shorter, A. and Onyanacha, E. *Street children in Africa*, 1999, p. 59

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 59

²⁸ Ibidem, p. 59

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 60

these children are left at the mercy of different kinds of diseases which may finally result to their death.

5) Drug Addiction: There is no doubt that drugs are a very common commodity among child laborers. Some of these children would even say that drugs are necessity for survival on the streets, helping them to make the harsh life bearable.³⁰ Some of the drugs which these street children take are Indian helms, cigarettes, cocaine, marijuana among other pills which they take to aid them sleep. It is worthy of note that some of these street children are so much addicted to drugs, an act which they cannot quit.

The Civil Rights of Children

In virtually all the societies of African society, the children's rights and privileges are favorably articulated in the patterns of behaviour, customary conduct and especially in constitutions. Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Amended (2011) outlines the civil and fundamental rights of its citizens as follows: Section 33 (1) states that every person has the right to his life, save in the execution of the sentence of a court in respect of criminal offence of which he has been found guilty in Nigeria.³¹ Section 34 (1) states that every individual is entitled to respect for the dignity of his person and accordingly (a) no person shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment; (b) no person shall be held in slavery or servitude; and (c) no person shall be required to perform forced or compulsory labour.³²

Beside the above, the Constitution still went further to state more fundamental rights of the citizen where the child is included thus: Right to personal liberty, Right to fair hearing, Right to private and family life, Right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, Right to freedom of expression and the press, Right to peaceful assembly and association, Right to freedom of move-

³⁰ Danjuma K. K.. *Child exploitation*, 2015, p. 67

³¹ Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria Amended, 2011, p. 33

³² *Ibidem*, p. 34

ment, Right to freedom from discrimination, Right to acquire and own immovable property anywhere in Nigeria, Compulsory acquisition of property, Restriction on and derogation from fundamental rights and Special jurisdiction of high court and legal aid.

The Bible Response on Child Labour

The Dignity of the Human Person: The reason why child labour receives moral attention is because human life is involved. Once it comes to the question of regulating the right to life, it is beyond the competence of arbitrary discretionary power. It is worthy of note that child labour is a social evil which is caused by lack of respect for the dignity of human person. It is then vital for us to ask this question; what is human dignity? Human dignity is what differentiates a person from other animals. Therefore, it is the worth of a human person. Erhueh posits that, "human dignity could be described as the elevated rank, the intrinsic worth, the high position or the greatness of human person in the universe in respect to God, fellowmen, and other creatures or realities in the world".³³ However, the Christians view human dignity as taken it flesh from the Bible. In Genesis 1:26-27, God created man in his own image and likeness. Therefore, it arises from the fact that man was created in the image of God; thereby the human person (the child) is greater in dignity than any other creature in the world.

Christ' Respect for Children: In the New Testament, so many instances abound on the respect for human dignity and especially the right of children. Luke 18:15-16: states:

Now they were bringing even infants to him that he might touch them; and when the disciples saw it, they rebuked them. But Jesus called them to him, saying, let the Children to me, and do not hinder them; for to such belongs the kingdom of God

³³ Erhueh, A. O. The dignity of the human person in contemporary Nigeria society. In E. E. Uzukwu (Ed.). *Bulletin of Ecumenical Theology: Church and Politics in Nigeria*, 1979, p. 75

Jesus took children seriously, when his disciples were dismissive of them. He had time for children in an age and in a society where children were expected to be seen, but not heard. For Jesus they represented those who were most receptive to the kingdom of God.

Divine Knowledge in Children: Jesus contrasts the attitude of the child with that of the learned and the clever when he said, "I bless you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, for hiding these things from the learned and clever and revealing them to little children" (Mathew 11:25; Luke 10:21). The implication of this statement is that Jesus sees in the child qualities and attributes that can and should survive into adulthood. The adult needs a child's eagerness, sense of wonder and innate trust. The kingdom of heaven is not the property of cynics, economic rationalists or the worldly wise; it belongs to those who do not count the cost, to those who honestly acclaim the truth wherever they find it. Adults should try and improve the knowledge of children rather than robbing them of their education and exploiting them of their better future.

Therefore, the above signifies that Christian ethics and morality respects and regards the human person as an entity created by God in his likeness and that children should be allowed living without any kind of exploitation. Thus, children should be loved and cared for because they are special gifts from God.

Recommendations on Child Labour in Rivers State

The problem of child labour in Nigeria, especially in Rivers State can be tackled through multi-dimensional approach. First, since many, if not most of the street child's problems arise from exploitation by adults; there is a crying need for education of the public to treat these children as children and not as objects of exploitation. There should also be an extensive public awareness program; this must necessarily include a discussion of the wisdom and a wider campaign of social reform that can remove altogether the evil of child labour in our society.

Second, the Government should ensure that the Child Bill passed to protect children from different forms of exploitation be implemented. As Fada affirms that:

Perhaps the greatest thing that has ever happened in the legislative function of Nigeria's National Assembly of the third republic is the passage of the Child Bill in May 2003. It is expected that the Bill will protect children from many forms of exploitation even though the major problem with Nigeria is not so much lack of good initiatives, but as in the implementation of the good ideas.³⁴

The achievement of this goal can be attained through setting up a legislative body to monitor the progress of the organization. Third, it is recommended that more Non Governmental Organizations (NGO) should be established in order to help the church and Government in taking care of the homeless and less privileged children in our society to minimize the effect of child labour in our society.

Conclusion

Child labour has been a problem which has eaten deep into the various systems of our society causing a lot of havoc to different families and the society at large. Many families have lost their beloved ones through the effect of child labour, ranging from child exploitation, prostitution, ritual killing, accident, and contamination of deadly diseases which exists among our street children. It is therefore, in the power of the Government to manage the State' economic resources well in order to better the lots of its citizens, so that this evil will have no means of coexisting with them. If the Government provides sufficient basic facilities in the various systems starting from the healthcare, education, political, economic and social institutions in Nigeria; the excessive desire for economic acquisitions of wealth by the members of the public will be eliminated and child labour in Nigeria especially in Rivers State will be abolished.

³⁴ Fada, N. M. *Some problems of the Nigerian youth: A panacea*, 2005, p. 8.

Summary

This work focuses on economic acquisition and child labour in Rivers State, Nigeria: Let the Bible respond. The problem of this work is based on the ill-treatment and exploitations given to children as a result of desire for quick material possession by some Nigerians, especially on the streets of Rivers State, Nigerian. Here, the brief history of child labour in Rivers State is presented, the causes of child labour in Rivers State with more emphasis on the economic acquisition, the effects of child labour in Rivers State on the dignity of the human person. It goes further to state the civil rights of the children and looks at the Bible response. The research proffered some recommendations on this subject matter. This work makes use of historical analysis and demonstrates that this unjust ill-treatment unleashed on children will not stop if the state and law enforcement agents do not prosecute perpetrators of this evil.

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