

Church's Response to the Menace of Child Abuse

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Abstract

This paper attempts to critically review the place of the church in curbing the tide of child abuse, as well as its advocacy in child abuse awareness and exposure prevalent within human society. The paper examines the consequences of abuses and maltreatments on children, and how such acts can degrade the values and ethos of society. While it is believed in some quarters that adults who were abused as children grow up to become abusers of children themselves, no empirical statistics have proven that to be the case. Efforts that have been made by many government agencies and other nongovernmental organizations in condemnation of such acts, the continued sensitization of the dangers it poses to societal growth and future generation is apt. In all of these, the church, as a place of both social and spiritual congregation is required to play a key role in continuous sex education, social media education and active participation in schools' Parents Teachers Associational meetings. Further roles of the church in society is also to ensure that the regular Sunday school curricula of churches include emphasis on social problems such as child abuse, negative use of social media, among others, in addition to the doctrinal and biblical studies that make up their focus.

Keywords: church, child abuse, societal growth, conservative view, liberal view

Introduction

Undoubtedly, children are endangered species. Due to their age and inexperience, they are often subject to abuse especially from people that they trust. Children do face abuse from their parents, relatives, teachers, older colleagues, religious leaders and even their older siblings. Basically, children depend on adults to start their journey in life. This includes at first, that the parents fulfill the child's need for basic necessities such as food, shelter, love and further gives the child some sort of direction or map on basic ways of life (Lindell, 2005:9). When parents or other adults with a caring responsibility towards children become abusive, the child's psychological makeup is often affected (Ibid). A developing child is sensitive to verbal (Vissing, *et al*, 1991:224-238) and physical assaults of different kinds (Creighton, 1992), (Hobbes & Wynne, 1996) and may react by displaying symptoms and a variety of effects in the long run (Lynch, 1988). Child abuse is a global and sensitive issue that

affects all societies. It is an anti-human act, and of course, can be considered an ungodly practice reigning over beloved human race.

The issue of child abuse has been an age-long phenomenon in human society. There have been recorded cases of inflictions of harm on children by guardians and care-takers, and infanticide was reflected in many civilized societies from Greece to China. (Maus, 1974:2). In fact, the recorded cases among many tribes in Nigeria on the practice of incisions and marks on children all in the name of protecting or delivering them from attacks of evil spirits, is an act of child abuse.

The early first century Rome witnessed the abandonment of innocent children at the foot of the famous lactarian column. The babies were left there to die, be picked by witches, slave dealers who would train them to be prostitutes or maim them and expose them on the streets to beg (<http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2012/01/05/abortion-and-the-ancient-practice-of-child-sacrifice.aspx>). Great philosopher like Seneca, Plato and Aristotle similarly consent to the killing of defective children (Van & Viljoen: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24591098>). Killing of deformed children among the Yoruba was at a point considered conventional. "To kill a man is often held to be a crime, but to kill one's child who is defective is a custom" (Akinrinola, 1990:10). 'Swaddling' – wrapping of little children in a way that their appendages will become immovable also revealed in the middle ages. The excuse given was that such children were easier to control or handle in that manner, not minding the gangrene condition they were being subjected to.

There were also cases of child abuse in Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand where children under fifteen years worked predominantly on commercial farms. Also in the 18th Century, there was a great exploitation of every young child in the mining and industrial factions, all these practices are regarded as 'Child Labor' (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 1948:503).

In Africa, and even Nigeria, there are recorded cases of child kidnapping and consequent money rituals whereby innocent children are used. Some communities in Nigeria still engaged in human rituals in which some missing children are discovered to have been killed and sacrificed for the needs of the community, particularly as demanded by the gods.

Different Views on Child Abuse

Child abuse is defined in the World Book Encyclopedia as "a state of maltreatment of a child by their parents or guardians". The vice may include acts such as beating a child so badly resulting in physical harm or inflicting them with burns and starving them. It is also defined as the physical, sexual or

emotional maltreatment or neglect of a child, especially by those responsible for his or her welfare (William, 1978:363). It could be defined as:

The physical and mental injury, sexual abuse, negligent treatment or maltreatment of a child under the age of 18 by a person who is responsible for the child's welfare under circumstances which indicate that the child's health and welfare is harmed or threatened thereby (Post, 2004:44).

Arguments about whether a particular act constitutes abuse under such a definition may focus on the nature of the act itself, whether the act caused harm or not. This is because there are different views on child abuse. It is pertinent to categorically state that the acts that are tagged as child abuse in one society may be culturally valued in another society. As earlier discussed, making incisions in a child's body may be termed as child abuse in Western society, while in another society it may serve another purpose. For instance, in some Yoruba societies, it plays the role of protection against evil or to avert perpetual evil occurring to that child. Hence, this paper discusses below the different views on child abuse.

Conservative Views on Child Abuse

Child abuse and child protection have always been a highly contested area of policy and practice. Historically, views have ranged from the structuralists on the radical left, who view child abuse and neglect as closely linked to broader social disadvantage, to behavioralists on the conservative right, who attribute child abuse solely to individual pathology. Some conservative commentators oppose the current child protection model, and want the existing act-of-home care system be replaced by rapid and even coerced adoption of most children in care (Post, 2004:44). The conservative view generally holds that the provision of concrete support services such as housing, food and payment of bills to relieve the immediate stress of poverty will directly prevent harm to children. The view suggests that individuals need treatment or punishment to prevent them, further from abusing their children; for example, while many poor and working class families are exposed to stress such as poverty, unemployment, inadequate housing and violent neighborhoods, most families subjected to these experiences do not abuse or neglect their children. In fact, child abusers do appear to have characteristics such as lack of adequate personal coping skills. The conservatives believe that every view on child abuse is relative to that society. While some parents are wealthy enough to take proper care of their children, some are not. What people consider as child abuse in the financially buoyant environments may be viewed as a necessary act in those

environments that may need to use children as economic tools with regards to their socio-economic situations.

Liberal Views on Child Abuse

The liberationists' argument is that childhood is an oppressed status and that the current state of affairs in which parents grant concessions to children who have little redress against the parents' actions and decisions is unjust and reinforces their oppression. The liberationists proposed a series of rights that children should have such as the right to choose where to live, the right to vote and the right to have the same financial status as adults (Wilkins, 2012:151). The liberal view is that children should have same rights as adults. Age is seen as irrelevant and self-determination as paramount. In respect of physical abuse, the development of anti-corporal punishment legislation and policy reflects the influence of liberationist views (Ibid.151). The liberal view is that children rights can only be realized when children have absolute autonomy to decide for themselves what is best for them. This includes right to sexual freedom, the right to choose their mode of punishment, and the right to choose where they will reside in. It also comprises the right to economic power which involves the right to work and achieve financial independence, the right to political power such as the right to vote, and the right to the information received by adult members of the society (Holt & Forson, 2000:121).

Protectionist Views on Child Abuse

Protectionist thinking about children has been applied to the question of child care through legislation since the late nineteenth century, and still underlines much of current policies and practices in the field of children studies (Carby, et al, 2012:152). Essentially, the argument from this viewpoint is that children have the right to protection from their parents by outside bodies in circumstance where their health and welfare are at risk (Ibid.). In essence of these conditions, parents have the responsibility of determining their children's rights up to prescribed ages.

Psychological Views on Child Abuse

Psychologically, abuse is sustained, repetitive and inappropriate. Ill treatment of a child or young person takes place through behaviour treating, isolating, and neglecting, discrediting, misleading, disregarding, ignoring and inappropriate encouragement. Psychologically, abuse damages a child's intellectual faculties and processes, including intelligence, memory, recognition, perception, attention, imagination and moral development (Colin, 2006). Psychological views are given to the contributions of the

disciplines of biology, attachment theory, psychodynamic theory, hearing view and the cognitive approaches.

Biblical Views on Child Abuse

A survey of the Bible reveals that both the Old and the New Testaments are not silent in respect of the issue of child abuse. People of the ancient times were involved in the odd practice, and of course, we are able to understand the mind of God in such respect, which without any argument, it is to give a fair treatment to our children. In the story surrounding the birth of Moses, King Pharaoh ordered the killing of all male children born to the Israelites, but made way for a rescuer life, since he had a mission to fulfill in life (Exodus, 1:15-22). Abraham, one of the faithful patriarchs and whom was counted a righteous man was also prevented from sacrificing Isaac, covenant child, by giving a ram as a substitute for his soul. It was also the practice of the pagans during the old times to sacrifice babies in fiery furnaces of a deity called *Molech* as recorded in Leviticus 18:21.

Jesus Christ was also exposed to the evil of child abuse during his early birth, when King Herod out of being power-drunk ordered the elimination of all male children from the age of two downward before God provided safety for Jesus' life in Egypt. "When Herod realized that he had been activated by the wise men, he was furious and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the wise men (Mathew 2:16).

Jesus Christ also rebuked his disciples when they were preventing the little ones from gaining his attention. People were also bringing babies/children to Jesus Christ to have him touch them. When the disciples saw this, they rebuked them. But Jesus Christ called the children to him and said: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such at these" (Luke 18:15-16). The scriptures direct parent to nurture, strengthen, discipline and teach their children and not to abuse them. In many pagan religions, parents have a life and death power over their offspring. In Christianity, the command to honour parents is followed by the prohibition of murder (Exodus 20:13). Parents are to be respected, but the authority of the parents is not without limits. Parents are under God and must obey the law (Walton, 1989:49).

The church should demonstrate its *saltiness* and manifest its good works in the areas of child abuse. Every congregation should determine that one of its central functions is to build strong, Christ-centered families, love, learning, godliness and stability. They should help families build a *fortress* of protection against the storms of life. Parents should know the capacities of

their children and not to expect more from them than is possible. Discipline is an expression of love (Proverbs 21:1, 13:24) and it must never be exercised in wrath or meanness (Walton, 1989:49). God shows special concern for the children. Community may neglect them or maltreat them, but Church must be ready to show love to them. The Bible says, *“For of such (children) is the kingdom of God (heaven)”*. To torment or torture them, is to kick against the kingdom of heaven. The Bible encourages discipline of children and not their maltreatment.

Child Abuse as Menace to Society’s Future

The word ‘menace’ connotes something or somebody that causes, or may cause serious damage, harm or danger. The paper intends to discuss the dangers or damages which child abuse can cause to the future of society. Without mincing words, all manners of mishandling of little ones have a serious implication on them, even as all have been able to recognize four major divisions of child abuse, namely: physical, verbal, sexual and emotional. Children are expert observers, but sometimes due to their limitations, they make mistakes in interpreting their experiences, they often draw wrong inferences and choose wrong means to find their places. A child that is not shown due love and given sense of trust, if he/she feels unwanted, rejected and unsure, can develop serious withdrawal from the society, pose aggressive and hostile attacks on physical environment and people (Drelkurs, 1964:12).

The products of victimization are seen in our daily lives, perpetrating all forms of anti-social behaviours such as highway robbery, rape, drug addiction, vandalism, political thuggery, cultism and other vices. Abused children are known to be psychologically and physically affected, as they eventually develop sickness, loneliness, lose concentration in their studies at school as well as experience rejection among their mates (Cameroon, 2003:38).

It is also discovered that relationship problem is developed by a child who is sexually abused. Skepticism or reluctance towards marriage due to early odd experience is also made manifest. Some grow up to be lesbians or homosexuals, such children grow up to develop abusive pattern of behaviour while the issue of over protectiveness is even conspicuous with the offspring of his or her family. In addition, abused children develop fear and anxiety; they suffer variety of psychological problems that do not impair their day-to-day functioning, but nonetheless make them unhappy. They abuse drugs, attempt suicide, experience severe depression, lose the ability to trust anyone and, therefore, fail to experience the giving or receiving of life. The emotional development is often arrested to the age they were when the abuse began and some of these abused children do grow up to become offenders. Some of the

abused children in the future involve in adolescent suicide, drug and alcohol abuse and become depressed.

It is believed that suicide attempters are most often persons who had experienced sexual abuse than those who never experienced abuse. Physical abuse has been commonly discovered in boys with attempted suicide, while physical and sexual abuse have also been confirmed as promoting self-mutilation behaviours such as cutting or burning oneself. It is also believed that most of the sexually abused survivors are clinically depressed teenage girls. Other dangers of child abuse include: borderline personality disorder, criminality and violence, dissociation and eating disorder, truancy, psychiatric illness, psychosomatic illness and poor health, teen pregnancy and sexual violence. An abused child, if not well monitored, will pollute his or her groups with abusive acts. Most children who suffered abuse due to divorce situation and some other factors will emit or manifest such behaviour in the church and the entire society (Van, 2001:34). All these kinds of children are found within our immediate environment.

Causes of Child Abuse in African Societies

The factors contributing to the cause of child abuse in African societies are enormous. There is no simple or singular explanation. Factors that can contribute to the likelihood of abuse and neglect occurring include parent's personality and attributes, the characteristics of the child and situational stressors (Oladipupo, N.D:1186). Rana Escher opines that, child abuse can be caused by a number of factors which include; parental, ecological and child factors that could make children vulnerable to abuse. These are briefly expatiated below.

- a. **Parental factors:** It is well known that abusive parents often report having been physically, sexually or emotionally abused as children. Parents' lack of knowledge of childhood development may result in unreasonable or unrealistic expectations. Lack of parenting skills and inappropriate attitudes can contribute to abusive behaviour.
- b. **Child factors:** The child's age and physical, mental, emotional and social development can greatly increase or decrease the likelihood of abuse, younger children, due to their physical size and developmental status, are particularly vulnerable to certain forms of abuse, such as the 'battered child syndrome' the 'shaken infant syndrome' and the 'failure to thrive syndrome'.
- c. **Family factors:** Specific life situations of some families can increase the likelihood of abuse. Such as marital conflict, domestic violence, unemployment, financial stress and social isolation.
- d. **Environmental factors:** Environmental factors are often found in

combination with the above factors. The incidence of child abuse is higher in some cultures and societies than others. What one culture defines as child abuse may be a socially acceptable interaction in other cultures (Rana, 2008, www.health24.com/mental-health/what/.) Rana also observes the economic pressure, physical punishment, and the degree of social support for parents; stress caused by poverty and lots more (Ibid.). Contemporary thinking emphasizes the importance of social factors and the social context of families where the following social factors are present: intergenerational patterns of abuse where children learn violent or non-coping behaviours from their parents, unsupported and unstable family structures, social stresses triggered by a variety of social conditions such as unemployment, poverty, poor housing, social isolation, barrier to accessing resources because of language, culture, religion or migration status, psychological illness and stress arising from some family conflict situation, urbanization, peer group and social pressure, misplacement of value system of the society, corruption and porosity of some of the nation's borders with homelessness of some parents (Colin, 2006).

Contextualizing this study to an African society is apt for an appropriate clarity in the matter concerned. Such is the various examples that can be distilled from the Egun people of Badagry, and how the issue of child abuse is addressed within that community.

One could say the nature of occupations of the people in Badagry give room for child abuse. "The occupations of the people are: farming, fishing, arts, mat-weaving, pottery, trading and recently, tourism and hospitality businesses (Adewoye, 2018:14). Based on my observations and empirical studies, the following are the causes of child abuse in Badagry and its environs:

1. Failure in parental responsibilities.
2. Lack of education or illiteracy in some villages.
3. Poverty and Joblessness by some parents.
4. Neglect of duty on the part of government in providing basic amenities and proper legal framework for the populace.
5. Ignorance of possible danger and lack of social education.
6. Loss of either or both parents – orphanage.
7. Inadequate caring on the part of parents and guardians.
8. Insecurity i.e. failure on the part of parents to provide necessary security for children at home in terms of good shelter.
9. Moral laxity of the parents which resulted in poor upbringing of their children.
10. Large family size and polygamy cum lack of family planning.

11. Single parenthood and divorce by parents.
12. Undeveloped and bushy areas expose children to danger of sex abuse, and even incest.
13. Porous borders with Republic of Benin and boundaries with Ogun State.
14. Topography that is, the Island and peninsula nature of the town.
15. Smuggling exercise or job that enhances daily income which could be used to entice the children. Sometimes it does not allow women to take care of their children properly.
16. Quest for skill acquisition or vocation at the expense of education.
17. Hawking during the odd hours of the day, that is early in the morning and night when many people have gone to work.
18. Religious activities without inculcating God's fear in children instead of religious indoctrination.
19. Lack of love for humanity.
20. Transportation means, especially motorcycles ('okada'). The atrocities caused on children by the owners these 'okada' in Badagry are numerous.

Unequivocally, these issues are affecting the socio-economic development of Badagry as a whole. The underdevelopment experience of Badagry today is a product of child abuse in the past. It is very unfortunate that the early introduction of Christianity to Badagry has not impacted positively on the level of civilization the community has achieved. Badagry happens to be cradle of Christianity, education, administration, economy and trading in many ways. In order to enhance growth, there is urgent need to eradicate all forms of child abuse in the community.

The Role of the Church in Eradicating Child Abuse

That child abuse has become a problem in our society is in no doubt. Therefore, the church needs to respond promptly to the scourge. The following manners of response from the church is recommended by this paper:

1. Church's response through family and friends: Parents are the role models to their children. They are the first and direct guardians of their children. In fact, if child abuse is to be eradicated or minimized, parents must be at the front burner. They must train their children and be ready to sacrifice what seems to be precious to them. When parents dedicate their lives to their children, it will become difficult, if not impossible for such children to fall victim to child abuse. The society also must join hand with the parents in preventing child abuse. The society can do this by quick intervention and prompt reporting of any cases of child abuse to the appropriate authorities

- (*Guardian*, June 19, 2014:6). Parents should inculcate in their daughters the moral values of dressing decently so that when they grow up they would not put on immoral or seduced-dressing. (Ibid.). They should not encourage male live-in relations/friends. Some rape cases involving minors are carried out by family members. Do not let unauthorized people carry your children to sit on their laps. Christians, families and the church should contribute to the prevention of abuse of children by supporting in cash and in kind to cater for the children who are vulnerable to abuse.
2. Church's response through society and workplace: Society should have strategies for preventing child abuse in their communities, most especially the community head. It should be the joint responsibility of all people in the community to protect children from harm and to put in place the corrective measures to ensure just that. On the part of our traditional rulers or leaders, they should redouble their efforts in keeping strict surveillance on any suspect of human abuse. Leaders should endeavour to alleviate poverty, create employment opportunity for graduates, monitor and cater for the children, youths and create welfare packages for all and sundry in the country (*Tribune*, December 5, 2000:13). Fortunately, the Child Rights Act demands protection of children from any form of abuse. Whenever we notice a case of child abuse, it is pertinent on our part to immediately swing into action by contacting any Child Rights organization available, and making sure that appropriate action is taken (*Tribune*, December 26, 2014:13). The churches can liaise with their communities with the aim of encouraging home and church cooperation in child abuse prevention. The involvement of Christians who are professionals such as medical doctors, teachers, nurses and social workers will give a more competent guidance to the members of the society (Harlock, 1955:27). The church should do everything possible to discourage parents from sending their under-aged children to go and learn trade, hawk or work in such public places like hotels or restaurants where they can be physically and emotionally abused.
 3. Church response through educational: Educational experts should offer tips on how to instill discipline in pupils without necessarily subjecting them to cruel treatment. "Teachers must be professionally trained on the use of aggression, fear and threat; the curriculum should also be developed to expose pupils to their fundamental rights while the school environment should be child-friendly" (*The Nation*, April 25, 2015:51).
 4. Church response through media: Church can make use of the social media through Television, Radio announcements or programmes to campaign against child abuse. They must teach their children on how to wisely use the internet facilities. Parents must help the church

by being vigilant and watchful on the way their children use their handsets. If possible, an under-aged child should not be allowed to use handset, except for official purpose.

5. Church response through government agency: The global initiative to End All Corporal Punishment of Children (GIECPC) recommended the use of legal and legislative measures to curb cruelty against children in home, educational settings and penal institutions. Government agencies should do everything possible to pass necessary information to the children through every available medium. For instance, children must be informed not to get into any car or ride with people without their parents' consent; that they should quickly get away from anyone who tries take them somewhere without adult supervision which is well known to their parents or guardians; and they should not accept invitation to sleep over in a friend's home. The government needs to put in place policies that will help the victims of child abuse, such as relocating victims in rehabilitation centres. The government should also support free education for all, including children. Above all, the hands of government agencies in charge of child abuse must always be on deck to avert this menace.
6. Church's response through NGOs and social organizations: These organizations are many, e.g. Women Trafficking and Child Labour Eradication Foundation (WOTCLEF), and lots more can be of assistance. If the people of Badagry and other child abuse vulnerable areas can follow these hints, this paper is of the view child abuse would be a forgotten phenomenon in such areas. Also, the traditional, political and religious leaders in the areas should beef up security, particularly, in the Lagoon Ports of Badagry that link to the neighbouring Republic of Benin and Ogun State. These are the routes through which the hawkers and child traffickers come in. The people in these areas should cut down the bushes within the main towns and encourage the owners of uncompleted buildings to complete them on time, lest they lose ownership of such properties. Again, it is observed that family planning campaigns are not popular in Badagry and its environs. In this wise, health workers should be empowered to visit all the rural areas and teach people on family planning methods. Unfortunately, children in this axis are exposed to petty trades at tender ages. This adversely affects their academic life and encourages immoralities, leading to situations whereby little ones are lured with money before being sexually abused. Authorities in these areas are urged to do everything within their capacities to eradicate hawking. To ensure this, different kinds of rural area empowerment programmes should be set up by the authorities concerned.
7. Children in this information age learn very fast and ask a lot of questions. They are also exposed to different channels that allow them

to access information. The social media, as good as it is in helping children communicate and access information, had also contributed to the abuse of these children. There are several children abusers on these social media that lure children into violent acts and in most cases entrap them and eventually abuse them. The parental control on paid TV stations and social media should be activated by the parents. There should be restrictions on what they see and hear in order for them to grow up properly. While the parents should censor what the children watch and listen to, they should not exasperate the young ones in the process, so that the children will not be driven into the hands of those who will confuse and abuse them. The use of carrot and stick approach is a veritable way of helping the children use the social media in a positive way. It is also advisable that parents should use these technologies with their children in order for the children to learn to use them responsibly.

8. The parents, through the Parents Teachers' Association (PTA), should encourage the schools that their children attend to have an active counseling unit. Most abuses happen when parents are not present. Some of these abuses happen in the school. If all the schools have guidance and counseling departments, they would be able to nip some of these abuses in the bud. If issues of sexual abuse are not addressed at the early stage, it will blossom into a scale that could be damaging. School administrators should also be put to task in educating their teachers not to use their positions to abuse the children under them. The PTA should not allow any act of abuse to be swept under the carpet. There should be constant engagements between the schools and the parents in order to monitor the happenings in and around the schools. The Sunday School Departments of the Churches should also consider integrating issues like child abuse, molestation, rape, virginity, social media usage, etc. in their curriculum. This will allow their trainings to be holistic and relevant to the day-to-day experiences of the children. Also, children should be given adequate room to air their views about issues that affect them. In addition to that, they should be encouraged to have mentors, especially older members of the church who have passion for children ministry.

Conclusion

Child abuse is an age-long menace which unfortunately, people are not well educated about, leading to a situation whereby the little ones are treated like personal properties. Thus, the contention of this paper is that our society must respect the rights of children and stop treating them as domesticated animals, but as human being. We should engage in frantic campaigns and enlightenment programmes to educate and discourage the menace. The

church should put up a spirited fight so as to put machineries in place in the society to halt the nuisance of child abuse that has been wrecking tremendous havoc on us and which will continue to do so, unless the challenge is appropriately and spontaneously addressed. The future of any society that could not curb child abuse would be in severe dangers. Children are the leaders of tomorrow. Their experience today would be their experiment tomorrow at wherever level they find themselves. For them not to become ill wind that blows nobody good, therefore, they must be adequately catered for.

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