

Original Paper

Dignity or Indignity of Labour: Tales of Child Labourers on a Nigerian Street

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Abstract

This research delves into the nature, and socio-economic conditions of child labourers in Fagge Local Government Area, Kano State, Nigeria. Employing an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), the study aims at uncovering the root causes, characteristics, and potential solutions to child labor in the specified region. Four specific objectives guide the research: 1) identifying the causes of child labor, 2) understanding the nature of child labor, 3) exploring the socio-economic conditions of children engaged in labour, and 4) proposing strategies to eliminate child labour. The study, based on qualitative data gathered from ten child labourers in Fagge Local Government Area, reveals that extreme poverty and the pursuit of survival drive children into labor. Surprisingly, the participants derive a sense of dignity from their work, viewing it as a preferable alternative to begging or stealing. The findings also underscore the sacrifice of education for work, not due to a lack of awareness of its value, but rather stemming from the impoverished socio-economic conditions of parents. A critical revelation is the absence of statistical records and social intervention programmes on child labour in the study area, highlighting the need for increased public awareness, robust social interventions, and stringent law enforcement to combat the menace of child labour. This research contributes to the discourse on child labour in Nigeria, offering insights into the lived experiences of those directly affected and proposing holistic strategies for eradication.

Keywords

Dignity, Indignity, Child Labourers, Nigeria

1. Introduction

The idea of dignity of the human person is premised on the belief that every human being is entitled to an irreducible level of respect, quality of life, and honour by virtue of being human irrespective of colour, race or tribe. Nigeria's National Policy on Education (2013) provides that quality of instruction

at all levels should oriented towards among other values, the value of respect for the worth and dignity of the individual. As such, acquisition of functional skills and competencies that are necessary for self-reliance is considered as an integral part of education. In the traditional African worldview, productive work or jobs is a means of earning a living in a dignifying manner. Begging is considered as an anomaly as it stripes the human person of their honour and dignity. As observed by Ujomo (2001), the inability the Nigerian state to define the principles and conditions for the establishment and sustenance of social order and human dignity has generated the problem of national security. This is because provision of basic human needs is a way to enhance human dignity. Conversely, human dignity in undermined by lack of basic human needs (Kure, 2020). The survival and wellbeing of the individual citizen within a society depends on the seriousness attached to dignity and worth of the human person. When a considerable number of persons within a society are so maltreated and dehumanized to the extent that they lose their sense of honour and dignity, such persons would be capable of doing any kind of harm to themselves and to any other member of the society.

In traditional African society, children have to work with their families, but today children are forced to work for their own and their family's survival. Department of labour and employment (DOLE), The reality is that children make good sources of cheap labor because they slip under the radar. They are seen as low-skilled workers without a voice, and so they are easy targets (Ajayi et al., 2020).

Kano state, one of the stronghold of child labourers in the north and the country at large, only approved the proposed bill on Child Rights (protection) Act 2010, in February, 2021. The council said it approved the bill, which reflected the position of Shari'ah on each and every section of the Child Rights Act (CRA) 2003 adopted by the federal government and has already been transferred to the State House of Assembly for passage.

The United Nations Conventions on the rights of the child (UNCRC) (1989) defines a child as a person below the age of eighteen years. "The International Labor Organization's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (ILO-IPEC, 2021), defines child labour as work that deprives children of their childhood, ability to fulfill their potential and dignity, as well as activities that are harmful to their physical and mental development. This includes any harmful work that impacts a child mentally, physically and socially. It includes any work that is morally dangerous because it interferes with their schooling or force them to leave school prematurely (ILO, 2020). Similarly, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) (2020), defines child labour as work that is physically, mentally, socially or morally dangerous and harmful to children and tends to deprive them of opportunities for development and schooling. Child labour is a function of poverty as children in poor societies are seen partly as economic investment, in that there is an expected return in the form of both child labour and the provision of financial support for parents in old age (Todaro & Smith, 2014).

According to International Labour Organization (ILO-IPEC) (2021), not all types of work done by children are regarded as child labour. This is particularly imperative in low and middle-income countries such as Nigeria where it is a tradition for children to work alongside their parents or

guardians. Unlike activities that help children develop, such as contributing to light housework or taking on a job during school holidays, child labour limits access to education and harms a child's physical, mental and social growth, especially for girls, the triple burden of school, work and household chores heightens their risk of falling behind, making them even more vulnerable to poverty and exclusion (ILO, 2020).

An estimate by the International Labor Organization (ILO), indicates that the current number of child labourers in Nigeria is 15 million, around 43% of the total population of the children and the highest recorded rate of child workers in Western Africa. The rates of poverty have widen from 20% to 53% in 2003 within 7 years, as suggested by the World Bank and CIA World Factbook. This financial stress forces more families to send their children to go out to work and contribute an income.

The Federal Government of Nigeria in 2021, with the support of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), launches the International Year for the Elimination of Child Labour (IYECL) and validates the National Policy on Child Labour and the National Action Plan for the Elimination of Child Labour (2021-2025) to reduce the rate of child labour in the country. Nigerian children are vulnerable to a wide range of abuses and harmful traditional practices. The national legal framework for child protection is the Child Rights Act 2003, but to date, only 23 of 36 states have adopted the Act. As observed by UNICEF (2022), the Implementation of the act is patchy with many local authority bodies unaware of their duties under the law.

The high level of diverse and tedious jobs that children execute in dangerous circumstances is particularly worrying. These jobs include being street vendors, beggars, car washers, shoe shiners, construction site labourer. Others work as apprentice mechanics, hairdressers and bus conductors, while a large number work as domestic servants and farm hands (UNICEF, 2020).

2. Theoretical Review

Several theoretical contributions have been made as regards the subject matter of child labour. This research work however, will be guided by theory propounded by Basu and Van (1998) because it has a great implications for analyzing poverty, child labour fertility and population policy. The model was built on two fundamental assumptions: "*The Luxury axiom and The Substitution axiom*". The luxury axiom states that, a household will send its children into the labour market only if the adult wage falls to the point where the household subsistence requirements cannot be met without the income generated by the children". The substitution axiom on the other hand, states that "child labour and adult labour are seen as substitutes from the point of view of the firm if the child labour required to produce a given amount of goods and services is low compared to adult labour.

Put more explicitly, a household consists of one adult and one or more children. If the earning of parents is high enough to meet the needs of the household, there exists no child labour. If the earnings of adult labour/parent falls below subsistence level, then, child labour must exist to support the household. If the two conditions above hold, it results in possible two equilibriums: one where earnings

are high and child labour does not exist, and one where earning are below subsistence and children must contribute their income.

2.1 Study Areas

Fagge Local Government is a commercial hub of Kano state in Nigeria. It is a center of commerce. It is the seat of many major markets like Abubakar Rimi Market (Sabon gari market), Kwari market, WAPA forex exchange market and Rijiyar lemo market. It also accommodate Malam Aminu Kano International Airport (MAKIA), Nigeria Railway Cooperation, Bokavu Army Barrack, Nigeria Air force Base, Malam Kato motor park, "Tashar Kuka" international motor park among various other economically and socially pulling factors that attract people.

2.2 Objectives of the Research

The overall goal of this research is to identify the prevalence, nature and the socioeconomic conditions of children in child labour among students in Fagge Local Government Area, Kano State. Specifically objectives the research seeks to;

1. Identify the causes of child labour in Fagge Local Government Area, Kano State.
2. Identify the nature of child labour in Fagge Local Government Area, Kano State.
3. To explore the socio-economic conditions of children in child labour in Fagge Local Government Area, Kano State.
4. To identify possible ways to eliminate child labour in Fagge Local Government Area, Kano State.

3. Methodology

This study employs an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative method of research that focuses on how people make sense of what happens to them. It is an approach that is suitable for investigating individuals' lived experiences (Delve & Limpaecher, 2023). It is concerned with the particular experiences that individuals have and their meaning making that occurs in relation to those experiences (Smith & Fieldsend, 2021). IPA is collaborative because it explores experiential meanings through the interpretative work between the researcher and the participants rather than being a theory-driven examination. This allows the researcher to understand better how an individual perceives a particular phenomenon. IPA is beneficial particularly when a study's aim is to perceive and determine the participants' accumulated lived experiences or standpoint (Smith & Osborn, 2003) opined that Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis is advantageous especially when examining and synthesizing participant-oriented topics.

The researchers provided a Semi-structured Interview Guide, designed specifically to extract information about the socio-economic conditions of the participants. Semi-structured interview according to Gill et al. (2008) comprises various extensive key questions that assist in defining the researched topic, and it also provided flexibility to interviewee or interviewer to explore other ideas in detail.

3.1 Setting

This study was carried out in Fagge Local Government Area, Kano State. The population of this study

consisted of all children in child labour among schooling and out of school between 2022 and 2023, who are between 5 to 17 years. The study relied on qualitative data collected from a survey conducted in Fagge Local Government area of Kano State, Nigeria. The participants were selected with the objective to get needed data for the study. The first stage involved random selection of five (5) out of ten (10) wards in the study area. The second stage involved purposive selection of two (2) participants from each ward. Ten (10) participants were selected as the total sample for interview out of the total population.

3.2 Data Collection and Administration

Data collection involved audio recording of interview and the use of interview notes for recording the responses and observed mood of the participants. Data were collected using self-design and validated instruments "Child Labourer Interview Schedule (CLIS). The interview was administered in the native language of the respondents with the help of research assistants. The participants were guaranteed the privacy and confidentiality of the information provided. This was done with parents' or guardians' consent. This is to ensure the safety of the participant

3.3 Causes of Child Labour

There are several reasons why children end up as labourers instead of going to school. Poverty is often a driving force, as families may rely on their children's income to survive. Similarly, through the process of collecting and analyzing data, two themes emerged, which include financial liabilities of children and the need for self-subsistence. It was very evident from their responses that extreme poverty, the need for survival and the urge to provide help their poor parents, proximity of the study area to a big market, motivated most of the children to labour.

For example, one of the participants had this to say:

"I need to do what I am doing as a means for my survival because I have to contribute to my family's meager income. I worked in order to help myself and my family. Otherwise, all of us will suffer". "I use the money to buy books especially textbooks. My parents sometimes manage to pay my school fees but they could not buy me textbooks. So I have to work to get some money to buy books and sometimes to pay my exam fees."

25th April, 2023.

Another participant who is an orphan stated that:

"My father died and my mother said she cannot take care of our needs alone, that is the reason why I'm selling sachet water on the street. She is also working but she cannot cater for all our needs". "I need to help her. Since we are surrounded by market, it's easy for me and my friends to get money by selling things like food and drinks, as there are many buyers. Sometimes, I also help traders and their customer to carry their load. By this I do help my mother."

2nd May, 2023

Responding to the same question of why he is working, a participant said:

"The reason is I just don't want to remain idle without doing anything since I am not attending any school."

15th May, 2023.

Sharing his lived experiences, another participant said:

"I worked in order to provide for myself all that I need; I don't want ask my parent. I don't like to ask

them for things I know they do not the ability to provide. They feel sad any time I ask them for anything like food, cloth or anything and they could not provide. I think, it is better for me to look for ways to provide my own needs”.

25th April, 2023.

In response to the same question, on the participants had this to say:

“My parents have travelled and there is no way for me to feed myself or pay the school fees. I then decided to find something to do in order to get money to pay my school fees My plan is to return to the school in the nearest future.”

28th April, 2023.

One of the officials of Social and Community Development Department while responding to why children are being engaged in labour said:

“Some of these children you see selling things on the street are from very poor family. Their parents are poor to the extent that they cannot feed them, let alone take care of education. If you ask them to stop working, how will they survive? Some of them have aged parents, some have disabled parents and other social economic issues. In such situations, asking or compelling such children to stop working could lead them to begging or engaging in other immoral practice like stealing. Begging and stealing are more dangerous than getting engaged in all sort of menial jobs.”

5th April, 2023.

There are instances of exploitation in the way the children are engaged. Some of the jobs the children engage in are often excessive, dangerous, or inappropriate for their age and development. It exposes them to physical and psychological harm. They are subjected to long working hours and unsafe working conditions.

As narrated by one of them:

“I don’t have specific hours of work. We normally start working from early morning around 8:00am to 12 am daily. I have to work hard in order to eat three times per day but I don’t receive satisfaction. We cannot eat what our body required with the money we receive”

25th April, 2023.

Another participant said:

“I work in construction sites. I go out to work from early morning to sunset, sometimes around 3pm when we finish early. Work in a construction site is very tedious. Carrying heavy loads in very sunny weather comes with too much fatigue.”

25th April, 2023.

On hazards being faced, a participant had this to say:

“I do attend school. As such, I start work from 2p.m, immediately after school to around 10pm daily when I come to sleep and I usually wake up with fatigue and sometimes headache. There is no resting time nowadays as a meager income cannot sustain me. There is little or no time to rest for me. I rest only when I don’t have work to do. At such times I get time to wash my clothes.”

25th May, 2023.

The outcomes from the interview showed that almost all the children engaged in one forms of exploitations, enduring long hours of work, and hawking on the street under unfriendly weather conditions. The meager compensation provided for the working hours of child laborers is a matter of great concern. Despite the long hours and difficult work conditions, these children receive very little in return.

A participant who sews saddle blanket shared a terrifying experience:

"We are paid N20 per dozen. We are paid after working for some days. Sometimes I sewed like 30 sets of saddle blanket if I did not go to school. If I went to school I cannot sew more than 10 sets, and you see twenty-twenty Naira ten times, it is just, two hundred Naira (N200). Consider how much I spend on breakfast, dinner and lunch, we are being cheated but what can we do?" 11th May, 2023.

The result of the data collected from participants showed that many of them, despite the long hours and difficult work conditions receive a meager compensation in return. Child laborers are underpaid, and many work long hours for little pay.

3.4 Socio-Economic Conditions of Child Labourer in Fagge L.G.A.

The socio-economic conditions of child labourers are often characterized by poverty and a lack of opportunities. They expressed their inability to stop working and attending schools because they want to avoid engaging in stealing, begging and other vices. The interview revealed subthemes socio economic conditions relating to; family background, school related factors, frequency and quality of meals, association with friends and their future dreams.

Family's background of child labourer in this context described the likelihood of child labourer in terms of the initial reasons behind the child's engagement in labour. It is important to note that being from a poor family is not the only reason for children's engagement in labour. This result shows that most of the children in child labour are from poor family with insufficient income to take care of needs of their household without the their (child labour) support.

Child labor is a significant issue that affects millions of children worldwide, compromising their access to education and hindering their overall development. When children are forced to work instead of attending school, they are deprived of their right to education and the opportunity to improve their future prospects. In the interview, majority of the participants combined school and work, the other half (50% of the population) of the children sacrificed school for work due to the socio economic status of their families.

Regarding his socio economic background one of the participants said:

"My father died and my mother is still alive. She is a food seller but the little income she makes from her business cannot sustain the family. Therefore, the six of us have to find work to do in order to help her. We do not want her to be begging since the extended family are not ready to help. Some of them also are poor. They cannot help even if they want to" 17th May, 2023.

Another replied that:

"My father is an herbalist, he sells traditional medicines. He has many wives and many children. His income cannot take care of all of us especially the children. We are like 22. Every one of us have to do something to add to whatever our father provides for us. So almost all of us have something we do for a living, no matter how small. Life is not easy in spite of the work I'm doing because sometimes I take my first meal around 2pm" 25th April, 2023.

While describing his socio economic background another participant replied:

"My father sells fire wood and we are 10 in number. The money he makes from selling firewood is not enough, though, he works very hard. He gives me money whenever he makes good sales but this does not happen every day. I have to do this menial jobs in order to survive" 25th April, 2023.

A participant when asked about education, revealed that:

"I love to go to school rather than going to work, but it's not possible to leave this work I am doing because there is no one to support me. It is not possible to stop working because no one will give me food to eat. I have to work every day in order to eat. So going to school everyday is not possible. They say there is free education but our teachers still ask us to bring detergents for cleaning the toilets. They charge Parents Teachers Association (PTA) fees to help the school provide some basic needs. They do ask for money to buy bundles of broom. How will I get money for all of these if I am not working at all don't have the money". 11th May, 2023.

Another stated almost the same view:

"I do not go to school. I am only doing working, I cannot abandon my work for school because I need the work to support my life. I cannot continue my study if I stop working, because no one will give me food to eat". 25th April, 2023.

The dreams and aspirations of child laborers as observed by the researcher vary significantly based on their individual experiences and circumstances. Some children, despite the hardships they face, maintain hopeful visions of a successful future if relevant interventions are put in place. These children possess a resilient spirit and recognize the transformative power of education and skill development programs, and support systems that can help them break free from the cycle of poverty. The results also show that only few of them have no hope in the future.

One participant shared a twisting and conditional dream, a dream that hinges on systematic intervention:

"I want to stop the work and start going to school. I know that going to school will give me a better future but when I quit, I cannot sponsor my schooling and no one to feed me. I need someone to help me". 25th April, 2023.

He further stated that:

"I wanted to become an engineer when I grew up." 25th April, 2023.

Another in a confident manner narrated his ambitious future dream:

"I want to become a businessman that is why I work hard to save some little amount after contributing some income to my family." 16th May, 2023.

Eight years old participant, in an optimistic tone stated that:

"I want to be enroll in a school so that when I grew up I will become a doctor. I know it is difficult but God can do everything". 2nd May, 2023.

3.5 Possible Ways out of the Child Labour

Solution to child labour in the context of this research refers to the various approaches, policies, and actions to be taken to address the menace of child labour. The findings of this research as responses of

the officials of the Ministry of Local Government revealed that effective implementations of legislations, gathering of statistical data on the menace, public awareness campaign, enriched social intervention programs, effective educational programs are possible solutions to the menace. To combat child labour, various social intervention programs aimed at reducing poverty need to be strengthened. Legal frameworks and regulations meant to prohibit child labor and protect children's rights would not have far reaching impact if the level of poverty remains high. In spite of the laws that establish minimum working age requirements and outline hazardous work conditions that are unfit for children, parents still expose their children to such risks as a result of extreme poverty.

One of the officials social and community development department said:

"Honestly speaking, up till now, I am not aware of any cogent law concerning child right or labour issue in Kano State, but when an issue concerning child abuse happens, we allow the extant law on human rights to take its course. It is about human right, but not about child right." 5th April, 2023.

Another official of community development department said:

"We do not have any project specifically on child exploitations or any form of child abuse, because at local government level. Fagge is not a Ministry on its own. It is a branch of the Ministry for Local Government. But at Local Government level we are doing our best to address the issues as they arise." 5th April, 2023.

He further stated that:

"Any time we have a case of child abuse in relation to labour, we look at the root cause of the problem. The abject poverty in the land is the root of the problem. Until poverty is reduced, no one will be able to stop these children from working on the street. Some of them are breadwinners as young as they are. There are some that go to school. Unfortunately, some of them cannot go to school at all". 17th May, 2023.

An official of community development department said:

"We only consider legal actions when acts of serious negligence and carelessness of the parents in nurturing their child is reported to us. Lack of oversight and regulation makes it possible for child labour to exist in hidden supply chains and informal sector jobs, leaving the children vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and poverty. The ministry of Social Development needs to be staffed and funded well to do this work". 5th April, 2023.

An official said:

"At our end, we try to discipline child abusers. But that does not always imply prosecution, fines or other actions that may be difficult to implement. Sometimes, we try to expose the culprit within his/her family and community so that everyone will become aware of his/her wrong doing in order to become a lesson to the society. Then the community leaders will monitor more closely the heads of family to look after their wards. Most times, the parents have economic issues, such that they don't have an alternative means of survival rather than sending their wards into labour, There is the need to provide socio-economic support for such parents so that they can be empowered economically. It is more of

social economic issue than a legal matter.”

On possible solutions, one of the children also had this to say:

“I want the .government to help reduce the prices of foods and other things so that our parents can provide for us.”
15th May, 2023.

4. Discussion of Findings

The findings on the causes of child labour in this interview indicated that all the ten children who participated in the study were from financially incapable family such that, labour became a means for their survival. The children have to contribute to their families’ meager income. It is also evident that children nearness to market is also a motivating factor for their engagement in labour. Previous studies have alluded to the fact that poverty is a key factor that drag children to labour when they are supposed to be in school. Huong and Nguyen Dang Tung (2017) reported that poverty and financial constraints were major factors driving child labor in Vietnam. Jabaar (2021) also reported that poverty is at the root of the menace of street children in Kano and in the larger Nigerian society. He further opined that existing poverty reduction programmes needs to shift focus to ‘uneducated’, illiterates, low income earners as they represent the larger proportion of those who contribute to the menace of out -of- school children in the Nigerian society. Okpura (2006) cited Basu (1998), views child labour as a solution of poverty more specifically for poor parents. He noted that children contribute as much as one-third of parents earning in poor households. He stated that children’s contribution has a noticeable effect in alleviating poverty in poor households. Nevertheless, Nielsen (1998) finding shows no positive correlation between poverty, low income and child labour in Zambia. His findings, thus challenge the claim of poverty being a major determinant of child labour.

With respect to the finding of this study to the effect that, child laborers were underpaid, and are working long hours for little pay, Oguntimehin and Adeoye (2020) have similarly reported the exploitative and unjust nature of child labour. According to them, businesses benefit from child labour as they pay lower wages to children than adult workers. Many of these children work in harsh conditions for meager wages, therefore, exacerbating the cycle of poverty.

It is also evident from the findings of this study that the participants readily left schooling for working. This has long-term implications for their well-being and future opportunities. Poverty and poor social security systems are the major factors driving children into labor, forcing them to leave school prematurely to work. Nair and Surolia (2020) reported that educational attainment is critical for breaking the cycle of poverty and ensuring better life outcomes for children. However, many child laborers have limited access to education, making it challenging to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary for decent work

Scholars have emphasized the importance of effective educational programs to combat child labor. According to Basu (2007), education can play a significant role in reducing child labor by providing children with the skills and knowledge necessary to secure decent work opportunities in the future.

Similarly, Bhalotra and Heady (2000) argue that education can reduce the demand for child labor by increasing the productivity of adult labor. Moreover, education can help to change social norms and attitudes that stigmatize schooling and perpetuate child labor practices in some communities (Cigno, Rosati, & Guarcello, 2002).

This study has revealed the nexus between social security and child labour. The participants seem to have been pushed to the wall as a result of extreme poverty. As such, they were desperate to survive by any means possible. Ablade Glover, Kwadwo Baffour Owusu and Barnard Guri (2017), also highlights the importance of adequate social intervention programs in providing educational and vocational training as a means of combating child labour in Ghana.

5. Conclusion

This study – the qualitative study on child labour, employed an interpretative phenomenological analysis to gathered information from ten (10) child labourers. The findings of the research revealed the extreme poverty and the quest of the children for survival as the reasons why they engaged into labour. The participants found dignity in what they do because to them, working is more dignifying than begging or stealing. The result of the study also indicated that children often forego schooling for work and engaged in exploitative work not because they do not realize the value of education but because poor socio-economic conditions of their parents.

The result also shows lack of statistical records and effective social intervention programs to tackle child labour in the study areas.

5.1 Recommendations of the Study

1. The government should create a statistical record to track and tackle the prevalence of child labour in the area. This will provide a basis for informed action and proper monitoring of child labour cases.
2. The federal, state and local government should develop and implement social intervention programs targeted at communities and households. Such programs should include education, vocational skills training and social support structures to ensure that n have families have access to decent means of livelihood.
3. Intensify efforts to address the root causes of child labour, such as poverty and financial liabilities, through community engagement and empowerment programs.
4. Strengthen laws and law enforcement mechanisms to combat child labour and ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.
5. Develop and implement policies that encourage and provide incentives for employers to hire adults rather than children.
6. Provide adequate compensation for child labourers to discourage exploitation and encourage children to pursue education.
7. Prioritize education for child labourers by providing them with access to quality education that meets their specific needs and encourages their full participation

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