

## Poverty of Parents and Child Labour in Benin City, Nigeria: A Preliminary Account of its Nature and Implications

Edith Osiruemu

*Department of History, Delta State University, Abraka, Nigeria  
E-mail: osiruemu@yahoo.com*

**KEYWORDS** Poverty; parents; child labour; income; implications

**ABSTRACT** This work starts from the basic premise that poverty, a major problem of rapid urbanization in developing nations, is a major contributory factor in the growth and exacerbation of child labour. Child labour in Benin City reflect prevalent urban poverty which compel parents to send children of school age to work to boost family income. For many hours a day, children of poor parents are engaged in economic ventures such as street hawking, cart/wheel barrow pushing, bus conducting, plaiting of hair as well as being apprenticed to artisans. By focusing on the linkage between parent poverty and exacerbation of child labour, it is expected that some primary data will be generated that will assist in understanding the root causes and implications of the phenomenon in an urban city like Benin as well as appreciate the burden of these juvenile workers in a developing economy.

### INTRODUCTION

The subject of children as the natural wealth of nations has been an area of active empirical investigations. Indeed numerous studies exist on groups of children whose parents are homeless and consequently homeless; children who live and fend for themselves on the streets, some are abandoned, runaway and have no family ties. Children who live with families: these include those who hawk all the day on the street and go home at the end of the day; go to school and hawk on the street before and after school, during weekends and holidays. This work is concerned with this latter group aged 9 – 14years, living with their parents in poor neighbourhoods in urban areas; and who have become economic resource to parents whose income they augment.

Child labour is worldwide phenomenon. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) estimates that there are 100 – 200 million child labourers in both industrialized and developing countries (viva.org. 28/8/2004:1). Estimates for Africa are that 25% of children between the ages of 10 and 14 are involved in labour while children comprise 17% of Africa's total labour force. By the same estimates. India with 15 million bonded child labourers has the largest child labour force in the world, (Human Rights Watch, 2004). Latin America too, is estimated to have between 15 and 20% of children in work; Pakistan records 7.5million, Thailand, 5 million, Senegal, 500,000 and in Nigeria, 12 – 15 million minors work more as a consequence of abject poverty, hunger and

destitution (www.viva.org; 28/8/2004:3; www.marxist.com, 27/8/2004:2).

Child labour refers to work undertaken by children and adolescents. Convention 138 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 1983 refocused the definition of child labour as economically active children between ages 5 – 14years; although Jayaraj and Subraman (1997) aver that a more embracing definition of child labour should depend on the quality of statistics available. Using data for the state of Tamil radu in India; they concluded that using the restricted definition of the ILO, then 13% of all children are labourers but using a more liberal age group categorization of children less than 15years of age, then the figure jumps to 33% (18). In the same vein, (Cain, 1977) found that children in a Bangladeshi village were economically active from the age of six and that the boys were net producers by the age of 15years (Jacoby and Skoufiar, 1999: 240).

### Theoretical Considerations on the Incidence of Child Labour

Extant classification of the complex and evolving literature on the incidence of child labour reflects a wide and contending spectrum of epistemic concerns; involving ideological paradigms and household bargaining models. The ideological paradigm has been advanced by Chilcote, (1981). Its' issue derives from an impression that the motives, actions and interactions of economic actors are crucially

related to the degree of tangibility of the values, which have to be employed to effect allocation. Thus the Marxist thought, is mediated through logical positivist and historicist tradition respectively. Its more liberal interpretations tends to be mechanistic and state centric, a consequence of its micro orientation (Chilcote, 1981:94). It focuses on manifest behaviour of classes resulting from the opposition of interests among the incumbents of basic economic functions (Strasser and Randall, 1902-4: 43).

It locates child labour within the context of the more fundamental poverty phenomenon which develops as a result of the inadequacy foisted upon a group of persons by structural circumstances. These structural circumstances involve relationships of social, political and economic nature among members of society with the economic relationship being the base upon which the political and social relationship rest. (Ake, 1981: 1). This economic relationship is expressed in specific structural relations or what is referred to as social relations of production. At the production level, the co-operation of individuals, the labour of all members of the family, women and children inclusive, are imperative (Marx, 1867:372).

Individuals and groups perform functions to complement those of others. In its natural form, the specific function performed by an individual or groups are determined by such variables like physiological endowments, intellectual capacities and geographical locations that are often unequal in terms of individual inputs into the production process. The manipulations of natural variables determine the pattern of relationship that arise in consequence between the members of the groups. Very often, these who are advantageously placed exploit the advantages to a point where they monopolise the means of production. Instead of working with others in a complimentary and reciprocal relationship they compel others into subservient and dependent position. When this happens, a large majority of people are deprived of their legitimate right to the means of production and may also lose part of the products of their labour. Since man has a vested interest in being alive, these alienated people begin another struggle, this time not against nature but against their fellow men. This is what in Marxian terms, is referred to as the class struggle. The antagonistic opposition between those who are alienated from both the

means of production and the product of their labour (Mandel and Abvack, 1970: 1).

The alienated become ill-equipped to tackle many problems of their existence. This is poverty which, reflects in under development and inadequacy consequential upon structural relationship. Inadequacy per se is not poverty especially when it afflicts everyone in society. Poverty arises where there is surplus to go round but the surplus is expropriated by some people thereby creating inadequacy among the majority. This point about surplus is important because it properly locates poverty within a historical context. It links poverty with social inequality and shows how the poor are by products of historical developments.

The emerging incidence of child labour in modern capitalist economies has been explained in this way. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more rapid industrialization and mechanisation basically fostered market oriented economies. Since machinery and labour compliment one another, the diminished need for manual labour tended to depress wages so much so that, for families of alienated members to survive, they must not only labour, but must allocate scarce intra-household resources such as assets, unearned income and transfer payments or welfare receipts (Poulantzas, 1984: 373). This leads to intra-household bargaining (between parents, or parents and children) and extra household bargaining where the head of the household, a unitary entity bargains with employers.

Models involving bargaining have been used to explain child labour and the level of wellbeing of children (Basu, 1998). In the intra-household bargaining framework, child labour is the outcome of a bargaining process between members of the household for example, parents and children or the father and the mother. The weight that each member receives can depend upon his or her contribution to the family's resources. In the intra-household bargaining model, the children bargaining power is inherently limited in that parents determine what extent a child works without necessary considering the child's welfare. The parents and the employer bargain about the child's wage and the fraction of that wage to be paid as food to the child. The key variables are those that determine the relative bargaining strength of the household vis-a vis, the employer.

In the extra-household bargaining framework,

the child who has negligible bargaining power in the household is effectively an instrument for the parents maximisation effort. Extra household bargaining model occurs where parents, being unable to make a child work productivity for want of complementary resources, send the child to an employer. The bargaining is between the parents and the child's employer over aspects of wages to be paid for child work and the faction that is paid in form of food to the child. The cash component paid to parents are spent by the parents (Gupta, 1998; Oruwari, 1996).

One point is emergent from the analyses above, that is, while models involving households bargaining tend to analyze incidence of child labour as fallout of household economies, the marxist/political economy approach extrapolates the growth and exacerbation of child labour in terms of historical and structural antagonism inherent in society. Thus historic inadequacy compels households to utilize all available resources, including the immature labour of children to eke out a sustenance (Abudu, 1988: 327). This is the case in Cameroun where Amin (1994) established that as the economic security of the adults weakened, there developed greater demand for child labour in different forms (2). Sancho-Liao (1994) noted in the case of the Philippines that the survival instincts of all members of the family dictate the logic that everyone must work in order to survive, no matter how harmful the working conditions may turn out to be. This is further re-enforced by consumeristic attitudes fostered by a market economy which is profit – driven, and looks at people as commodities and market able labour, including those of children (2).

Similarly, Oruwari (1996) and Okojie (1987) studies of the social characteristics of children susceptible to child labour, linked the phenomenon to the socio-economic status of poor parents who subsist at the periphery of the urban economy. These parents are found among three identifiable economic groups: the small farmers, the petty traders, the under employed and unemployed (Okojie, 1987: 75). These are people whose income, more often fall below the figure established as the poverty line (Prado and Tobi, 1994), and are counted as poor because they lack the resources to sustain a socially acceptable minimum standard of living in terms of income and consumption (Townsend, 1992). A child is considered to be susceptible to getting

involved in child labour when his parents fall into either of these aforementioned groups. The linkage between parents poverty and child labour in Benin City is next examined.

### **Poverty of Parents and Child Labour**

Poverty breeds poverty. A poor individual or family has a high probability of staying poor. Low incomes carry with them high risks of illnesses, limitations on mobility, limited access to education ... Poor parents cannot give their children the opportunities for better health and education needed to improve their lot... thus the cruel legacy of poverty is passed from parents to children. (Annual Report, 1964:12)

According to the multiple indicator cluster survey, published by the Federal Office of Statistics (FOS) in 1996, only one in every ten Nigerians can be described as non-poor. The other nine are either 'core poor' or 'moderately poor' (www.marxist.com 27/8/04). In addition, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in Nigeria in its debut Human Development Report, ranked Nigeria 137<sup>th</sup> out of 174 nations with low human development. Graphically, Nigeria's development index (HDI) value is put as 0.400. Countries with HDI value below 0.5 are considered to the poor and to have low human development (www.marxist.com, 27/8/04:2)

Poverty in Nigeria has been a long-standing issue. Its' reality manifests in incidences and severity over the years. Basically, poverty manifests in prostitution, corruption, robbery, street life, increased unemployment, living in squalor, shackles, high infant mortality, acute malnutrition short life expectancy, human degradation (UBA monthly digest, March/April 1996). Child labour is considered as one of the faces of the poverty of over 70% of households in Nigeria; an essential means of income for families' on the poverty line (Fall, 1996:2) (www.viva.org. 28/6/2004:2).

An ILO, 2003 survey into the incidences of child labour in Nigeria, identified eight causative factors: these are cultural influences, economic problems/national debt, low education, political problems, ethnic strife/family disintegration, unemployment/inability to cope, street life and single parent families, with the last three factors exacerbating poverty (Ocha Irin 28/8/04:1).

In her study of the extent of poverty among

women and their households in Benin City. Okojie, (1987) identified five factors-housing, illiteracy rates, possession of consumable durable, unemployment/underemployment/low incomes, and inability to cope with needs of members of households, as key indicators of the extent of poverty among women. The last two indicators are relevant to the main focus of this study.

Geographically, Benin City lies between latitude 6° 12' and 7° 13'N and between longitude 5°E and 5° 45'E. It is located on a fairly low lying coastal plain and it is about 78.64metres above sea level. The total area covered by the city is about 1125sq.km. The 1991 National Census put the population of Benin City at 780,976 (Min. of Finance and Economic Development). Linguistically, Benin is Edo speaking environment.

### METHODOLOGY

The reproduction of poverty through child labour was investigated in Benin City in November and December, 2003. Using structured interviews, a total of 210 children were sampled in seven locations, chosen for their concentration of immature labourers. The interview schedule centred on the following issues:

- (a) Children perception of child labour
- (b) The background / household of child.
- (c) The occupation of parent or guardian
- (d) The ownership of businesses/business premises
- (e) Source of capital / use of income earned
- (f) The attitude of parents to their engagement as workers

The interview was conducted largely in Pidgin English which is the common language of the city. In all, 105 girls and 105 boys were interviewed. To get the opinions of the parents, about the problem, 15 mothers and fathers were interviewed. The same questions (as with the children were posed while emphasizing their attitudes to their children on gender lines. Data from interviews were analysed using percentage ratio and tables to highlight the proportion of children involved in child labour.

### FINDINGS

The bulk of the respondents were mostly aged 10-14 years, with smaller representation among the 5-9 and 15-18 years olds. In other

words, the bulk of the respondents mainly males were illegally engaged in work, being aged below the statutory minimum age of 14 years set by the International Labour Organization. The sex structure of child labourers was adopted as an indicator of this incidence. From this survey of 210 children, 76.19% were males while the females represent 28.81%. A major reason adduced for this dominance of male child workers is parents reluctance to expose female children to hazards such as kidnap and rape. However the survey revealed that 80% combine work with schooling working 1 – 5 hours on weekdays and 6-10 hours on weekends and during holidays. In abstracting household chores from business work, female respondents assist their mothers in cooking, washing of plates and cooking utensils and sweeping the house. They look after their young siblings when the mothers are occupied. They fetch water from public taps or buy from private boreholes for household use. About 80% of the girls hawk mostly food items (vegetables, fish, fresh pap and yams) for their mothers, sometimes in the morning between 6.30 am and 7.30am before going to school that open at 8.00am. After closing from school, they hawk again, mostly from 2 – 5 pm before coming home to assist in preparing food and cleaning the home. About 60% of males generally hawk while 24% assist in fetching water for household use when necessary.

Contrary to Oruwari, (1997) and (Abudu, 1987) findings in Port- Harcourt and Benin City, about child perception of business work: 130 of the respondents, making up 61.9% perceived the work they do as an indicator of poverty and were not disposed to continuing with the jobs they do. This is as a result of the tedium, loss of recreation time, risk to life and harassment by law enforcement agents. They however felt compelled to work due to the harsh economic conditions experienced by their families. They continue to work, basically to help out in the family finances obviously collaborating the FOS 2003 data on the impact of child labour on the children of school age. This survey had showed that about six million of the working children were not attending school at all. Nearly one million of these had been forced to drop out of school due to poverty or because their parents demanded that they work in order to boost the family income (Irin news, org . 28/8/04 : 1).

Our analysis of data on background and occupation of parents or guardians show their

concentration in low paying jobs. Expectedly, some fathers of child workers were traders (28.10%) artisans (26.19%), service workers (23.1%) clerical workers (2.8%), civil servants 10% and others, 9.03%. Their mothers were predominantly traders standing at 65.24%. This attest to the poverty bias of the parenthood of these children.

The sources of capital and use of income of child worker also established a link between poverty of parents and sustenance of juvenile labour. It was obvious that the parents of children, in particular the mothers own a large proportion. (73.81%) of the sampled enterprises. Only 26.19% businesses were personally owned by workers in age bracket 15 – 18years. Children between ages 5 – 14, being very young, cannot raise capital on this own, were mostly propelled, sometimes, compelled by their mothers to work.

On the basis of three important variables- loans, gifts and savings, the data show that parents contributions constitute the major source of child labour participants. Standing at 70%, only about 5.24% of the respondents indicated that they obtained goods on loan from creditors and suppliers; for example; ice – cream and sachet water sellers. 10.48% indicated that they go to rent and pay at the end of the day. In this group are the wheelbarrow pushers who pay daily rent to wheelbarrow owners while 14.28% relied on their previous savings. 18% of respondents revealed that their parents own the premises they conducted their activities while 72% traded on hired premises, others, about 20% use open premises, or operate in private compounds close to busy road junctions where their wares were displayed either in wheelbarrows, or on pavements. For this latter group, local government task collectors, collect ground fees from them, thrice a day.

Another link between parents poverty and child labour activities reflected in the large number of respondents who live very close to their business premises. In all, about 60% of the children live less than a kilometre from their place of work: this was common among females respondents while their male counterparts tended to live between 1 –2 kilometres from their business premises and almost all respondents (about 71%) go on foot to their business premises.

Use of earned income indicates a relationship between parents poverty and child labour, and reveals parents perception of child labour. This

survey showed that majority of child labourers earned above N300.00 daily. A few, indeed just 38.08% of them earn less than N200.00 a day. Majority of the respondents worked to relieve their parents of their financial obligations to them (Ocha Irin: December, 2003). For example, 28.57% of the children spent generated incomes on schooling, 23.81% on feeding, 13.3% on clothes and 1.43% on transport (see table below). Although mothers interviewed were not able to quantify how much their children earned from hawking and also the percentages of their earnings to total household earnings (since they do not perceive the earnings in the orthodox way), all the mothers agree that children's earning are life savers. They assessed the earning in terms of how much the money augment their expenditures on essential items for the family. Sometimes they use the income to pay incessant levies by school teachers. Very few save the income for the children.

**Table 1: Pattern of expenditure of earned income by child labourers**

<i>Use of income</i>	<i>No. of respondent</i>	<i>Percentages</i>
Schooling	60	28.57
Feeding	50	23.81
Clothes	28	13.3
Transport	3	1.43
Savings	66	31.43
Others	3	1.43
Total	210	100.00

*Source:* Field Survey, December, 2003

Another indicator of the poverty of the parents of child labourers is their attitude to the engagement of their wards in work. Over 76.19% of the children indicated that their parents approve of, and encouraged their participation in work. Where parents were not the direct employers they provided information on job opening. Poor parents presumably acting under economic compulsion actively encourage the employment of their wards or turn a blind eye where it occurs without their expressed approval.

## IMPLICATIONS

Juvenile labour, a resultant phenomenon of object poverty in urban cities such as Benin City holds several implications. Its greatest tragedy is that it condemns the child and future generation to further poverty. Children from poor homes are often less motivated to continue in

school since studies are inter-spaced with spells of employment. This deprivation ensures that the cycle of poverty and exploitation continues. This is in the sense that a child worker may eventually become an unskilled adult, consigned to low pay jobs. Thus child labour gives individuals no opportunity to break out of exploitative labour.

Child labour results in urban unemployment as they pick up jobs meant for adults. This is tied to cheaper labour they provide so employers of labour find their labour more attractive.

It may be true that child labour has a way of helping poor parents out of financial distress by way of paying for rent, food, clothes, fees and books. In fact, the national estimates put the number of children under 14 years working to help to pay the cost of school at 8 million (FOS, Abuja, 26/12/03) but the same survey revealed that nearly 1 million of these had been forced to drop out of school because their parents demanded that they stop school in order to boost the family income. This certainly portend more danger for manpower development and human resource of the nation.

In addition, child labour has a potential to corrupt young minds through acquired bad influences in two ways. A child that misses school frequently hardly benefit roundly from the educational system. The consequence is poor performance in examinations. This scenario may make examination malpractice attractive to the child in the bid to acquire a certificate at all costs. This leads to the production of incompetent and unlearned graduates, with grave consequence for the nation on the long run; child labour may also lead children into adapting behavioural patterns inimical to healthy citizenship. They may even indulge in negative activities with implication for criminal acts and imprisonment. The negative tendencies include prostitution, armed robbery, pick pocketing and hooliganism. In Benin City, child labourer pose a major task for law enforcement agencies, as corrupt politicians in order to oppress opponents and to subvert the electoral process sometimes use these children to thumb print voters cards and later on, these become thugs and prostitutes. Indeed, Benin City is notorious as a breeding ground for females who have been victims of women traffickers outside the country. This in sequel upon poverty of parents who encourage their siblings into early economic activities not

minding the hazard they portend to the growth of the child and the society.

## CONCLUSION

Children in one economic generating activity or the other, has resulted in the growth and exacerbation of child labour. This exposition, however, has empirically established a focus beyond mere income generating reason to such issues as poverty as reflections of modern capitalism which finds all labour marketable. Tracer studies on juvenile labour, with a view of identifying other causal factors is therefore recommended.

## REFERENCES

- Abudu, F. 1987. "Urban Poverty and Labour Abuse in Benin City", (pp. 323 – 31) in P. Makinwa and O.A. Ozo (eds.), *The Urban Poor*. Ibadan: Evans Brothers Publishers,
- Ake, C. 1981. *A Political Economy of Africa*. London: Longman.
- Amin, A. A. 1994. "The Socio – Economic Impact of Child Labour in Cameroon. Labour, Capital and Society, 27 : 2 (November) Centre for Developing Area Studies. "Annual Report of the Council of the President" reproduced in (Ed.) Atkinson 1973, *Income and Inequality*, London: Penguin 52.
- Basu, K. 1998. *Child Labour, Causes, Consequences and Cure, with Remarks on International Labour Standards*, Washington DC: World Bank.
- Cain, G 1966. *Married Women in the Labour Force: An Economic Analysis*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Chilcote, R. 1981 *Theories of Comparative Politics: The Search for a Paradigm* Boulder, Westview.
- Child Labour. "Risk Facing Children" 2004. Viva Network. www. Viva or: 28 (August)
- Fall, I. 1996. Poverty. www. Marxist . com/Africa, Nigeria, ethnic conflicts.
- Gupta, M.R. 1998. "Wage Determination of a Child Worker: A Theoretical Analysis" *Review of Development Economics*. Calcutta: Jadavpur University.
- Jacoby, H. G. and E Skoufias. 1999. "Risk, Financial Markets, Capital in a Developing Country." *Review of Economic Studies*, 64: 240
- Jayaraj, D. and S. Subraman. 1997. "Child Labour in Tamilnadu: A Preliminary Account of its Nature, Extent and Distribution." *Working paper No 151*, Chennai: Madras Institute of Development Studies.
- Mandel, E. and G. Abvack. 1970. *The Marxist Theory of Alienation*. New York: Pathfinder
- Marx, K. 1867 Cited in Anikpo M. 1984. "Is Poverty an Urban Phenomenon?" *Proceedings of the National Conference on Urban Poor in Nigeria: I – 23*.
- Nigeria: 15 million Children Work, Mainly to Pay for*

- School. Ocha – Irin*, 2003. December) in [www.irinnews.org](http://www.irinnews.org). August 28, 2004.
- Okojie, C. E. 1987. "Income Generation in Occupational Structure Among the Urban Poor: The case of Women in Benin City", (pp. 75-90) in P. Makinwa and A.O Ozo (eds.), *The Urban Poor*. Ibadan: Evans Publishers.
- Oruwari, Y. 1996. "Children and the Built Environment in Nigeria who should Defend Their Interests in Housing Provisions?" (pp. 155 – 67) in Y. Oruwari (ed.), *Gender, Sustainable Development and the Urban Poor in Nigeria*. Port Harcourt: Hisis Press.
- Poverty. [www.marxist.com/Africa/Nigeria,2004](http://www.marxist.com/Africa/Nigeria,2004) August 27.
- Poulantzas, N. 1984. *Classes in Contemporary Capitalism*. London, New Left Books.
- Prado, R. and D. Tobi. 1994. "Notes on Poverty focus in Country Programme." *Paper presented at the UNICEF Workshop on the Urban Poor: CEDC/IITA* Ibadan, May, 3-4
- Randall, S. and H. Strasser. 1902-4. Cited in T.A Imobighe, C. O Bassey and J. B Asuni 2002 *Conflict and Instability in the Niger Delta: The Warri Case*. Ibadan: Nigeria Spectrum Books Ltd.
- Sancho-Liao, N. 1994. Child Labour in the Philippines: Exploitation in the Process of Globalization of the Economy. *Labour Capital and Society*, 27:2 November. Centre for Developing Area Studies. Canada: Might University, Montreal.
- Townsend P. 1992. "The Meaning of Poverty." *British Journal of Sociology*, 13: 210-227
- UNDP. 2002. Human Development Report. [www.marxist.com/Africa/Nigeria,2004](http://www.marxist.com/Africa/Nigeria,2004) (August,27)
- World Bank Report. 1996. *Nigeria Poverty Assessment Report No 14733*. Washington D.C.: World Bank.