



THE INSTITUTION OF DOMESTIC HOUSE-HELP IN NIGERIA: A REVIEW OF IMPACT

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Abstract

This work examined the institution of domestic House-help in Nigeria and its implications on national development. While using oral history and secondary sources of information gathering, the work reveals that the institution of domestic house-help is as old as the history of man. In Nigeria, domestic house-helps were, and are mostly children in their prime age who are meant to be under the supervision of their parents. With the inability of these parents to provide for them, the children are usually given out to relatives, friends, or neighbours, within and outside their homes. The domestic house-helps are subjected to working long hours under worst conditions and sometimes, they were physically and verbally abused. However, this paper noted that substantive legislation against child labour exist in Nigeria, but its legal enforcement remains the biggest challenge. Following the current increase in its demand and the creation of various methods of its acquisition, the paper recommends that government should enforce legislative and policy action to protect young domestic workers and also introduce appropriate penalties on the defaulters. This is so because if the institution continues to operate without appropriate legal guidelines, the future of Nigerian youths will be in jeopardy.

Keywords:

Introduction

Domestic house-help has become an important instrument of complementing domestic tasks in various Nigerian homes. House-helps are used in taking care of children, washing, cooking, cleaning, hawking and sometimes, in farming chores.

Its wide acceptability and practice in Nigerian societies has generated concern amongst scholars, historians and non-historians alike. But the greatest concern is that this institution of domestic house-help which had begun since the pre-colonial time has not received the adequate documentation it deserves. In Nigeria, especially in the Southeast and South-south regions, there is hardly any home without a house-help, or that has not given out any child for house-help.



Domestic house-helps are also popularly known as “Maids”, “domestic worker”, or “domestic servants”. This is found in virtually all homes in modern Nigerian societies where the demands of employment grossly affect the time spent at home by the career-centred families. In Igboland it is known as “Igba boi”, in Akwa Ibom it is called “Ajien Ufok” in Ijaw it is known as “Akoni”, while in the Delta-Edo areas it is called “Ovwie”. Dick (2019;45) noted that house-helps are usually boys and girls who go to live with other families to serve as domestic workers. They are most times, not paid but their services are converted into training them in school or in entrepreneurial empowerment. Most families in pre-colonial and post-colonial societies have had to engage the services of house-help or domestic worker at one time or the other to assist with farm work, business, domestic activities and child care.

The growing trend of this phenomenon in career-centred families located especially in urbanized settings in recent times is becoming a serious problem that calls for concern and study. It calls for serious consideration particularly with regard to family stability along the dimension of the performance of men/women and their career (Zahrah, 2020: 97). In Nigeria and most countries whether developed, developing or less industrialized, career women who recruit domestic workers are in rapid increase. Smaller family size no doubt has weakened the traditional role of the extended family hence, hiring of domestic worker remains a viable option if family members are to cope with the demands of their career. This has made scholars to describe domestic house help as “a necessary evil”. Although the role of house-help in child care, socialization and domestic work are enormous, there are insinuations concerning the damages done to such families in the long run. Apart from the damages created by the house-helps in the families, there also exists damages done to the house-helps by their masters and madams.

Today, the house-help does virtually everything in the home from washing to caring for the children and cooking of meals for all the family members. Their role in the society have become very significant to the extent that it has been institutionalized, and captivated the attention of scholars as well. A careful study of the African societies from pre-colonial to this modern time reveals that domestic house-help has been an integral part of the life of the people of sub-Saharan Africa. It is an age long institution in Africa as it is used as a means of acquiring labour force and quantifying family wealth. It was in this respect that domestic house-helps have played pivotal roles in the development of African society. This is true because the house-helps sustained the state by actively taking care of domestic affairs of the house-hold as servants and also participate actively in the economic activities as majority of them assist their masters and mistresses in farm works and trade.

However, a closer look at the internal dynamics of the institution of house-help indicate one of uncertainties, insecurities and acute dehumanization even in the mist of abundance



and rhetoric of right and entitlements. If global capitalism is all about opportunities to house-help this comes at the cost of their dignity as human beings. Not only are house-helps often victims of ultra-exploitation, they enjoy little legal protection and even their basic human right are always in jeopardy (Dick, 2019:102). House-help in Nigeria and Africa in general, are indeed powerless and extremely vulnerable to manipulation and abuse. They are often threatened as if their humanity is deliberately frozen with impunity. It is therefore against this backdrop that this study is set to review and document the several attendant negative effects of this institution of domestic house-help both on the child, the master or mistress, and the society at large.

Trends in the Institutionalization of Domestic House-Help in Nigeria

Domestic house-help has been an important phenomenon throughout history. It is found in many places from classical antiquity to present time, with slight modifications in its method of acquisition. It is very difficult to say when its practice began in Nigerian communities. Oral sources have it that domestic house-help had been in existence since time immemorial, but that it acquired more attention during and after the colonial times.

Fundamentally, during the pre-colonial time, children were sent out by parents to live with close or distant relations to either learn an aspect of trade, help their relatives with house-help chores, or just to change the living environment for a while. Sometimes children were forcefully taken as ransom for the debt of their parents. Pawnshop was widely practiced in most pre-colonial Nigerian societies as children were used as collateral for loans. In Efik, Anang, Ibibio, Ijaw, Ogoni, Ikwerre, Etche, Ahoada, Ekpeye, Aniocha, Kwale, Isoko, Itsekiri and Urhobo societies of the South-south region, and the Igbo communities of Ohaji, Egbema, Obiti, Awara, Umuakanne, Mgbirichi, Orlu, Mbaise and Nkwere just to mention a few, domestic house-help was regarded as a family oriented institution as it was a socio-economic phenomenon. In the Efik and Kalabari societies house-helps were recruited and integrated into the household as new members of the master's household and thus boosting his socio-economic status (Briggs, 1997: 56). The House System became the pivot upon which this practice revolved.

With the advent of colonialism, a new dimension of the institution of domestic house-help was ushered in. Many missionaries drew to themselves as many house-helps as they were able to keep in order to ease their domestic works. In the same vein, many civil servants of the colonial government equally did same as the supply was always available. And again, most parents were delighted in giving out their children as house-helps. This was borne out of their desire to receive gifts of European manufactured goods from the colonial masters. It was also a pride to most parents to see their children living with the Europeans in the reserved areas. In some instances, some of the Europeans assisted them in the education of



the children at least primary school level. Adding to these, was the relief of the burden of caring for the children as the family was populated with many children.

The attainment of independence in Nigeria to the indigenous people. And the acquisition of western education by few elites created new class structure that divided the society into the rich and the poor, or the haves and have nots. Coupled with this, is the visible improvement in medical facilities which has in turn reduced infant mortality rate, giving rise to population explosion in various Nigerian families and societies. The task of fending or catering for the children became cumbersome for parents and as a way out of such difficult situation, parents engaged in giving out their children for house-help. Thus the poor families have become the mill when the poor children are produced and supplied to the rich family to serve as domestic house-helps (Akpan, 2005: 73).

Traditionally, domestic house-helps who are predominately children of between 10 and 16 years of age, are seen as assets to assist with household chores, in business circle and farms. This socialization and its related activities have been carried out within the social safety need of both the family and society. However, with increased unemployment, poverty, weak institutional framework and a breakdown of extended family systems, hundreds of children have been forced into new homes that are exploitative, hazardous and harmful to their overall welfare and development (Stephen, 2009: 62). In the contemporary time, house-helps in most cases are used as hawkers under very poor parental care.

Several factors account for the growing trend in the institution of domestic house-help. These factors range from poverty, greed, breakdown of the family system and values to large family size amongst others. In most cases, these children are usually given to respected and trusted members of the community who promise to take good care of the children. Given this promise, parents of large families readily dispose their children to wealthy families in urban areas. Obviously, these children are given to those who are known to them, or even their relatives who promise to train them, especially the girls. In some instances, desperate poor and uninformed parents willingly cooperate with those seeking for house-help in exchange for small fee. In the long run, however, these relatives exploit the trust of the people and thus exploit the children for money.

In addition to poverty and hunger, there are other “push” factors that encourage the practice of domestic house-help. These include gender and ethnic discrimination, social exclusion, lack of educational opportunities, domestic violence, teenage or forced marriage, rural urban migration, displacement, and loss of family members as a result of death. To avert these misgivings, parents are motivated to send their children to safe and suitable areas. In some instances, displaced children or orphans offer themselves for house-help services to



persons that need them. There is hardly any household especially in Southern Nigeria that does not have a house-help. The family who takes in the house-help will under normal circumstance, be responsible for the house-helps upkeep and education. In some cases, a monthly pay is usually sent to the house-help's family in order to retain their consent and support for the child's continuous stay with them.

The Roles and Plights of Domestic House-Helps

Any evaluation of the roles of domestic house-help in Nigeria must take into consideration, the economic base of the society, the number of house-helps who are seen sometimes as slaves in relation to freemen, and specific duties they perform which distinguish them from freemen. The house-helps provide domestic labour needs, including farming. In domestic activities, the house-helps are made to work harder than the free members of the family. Adult house-helps like men perform men's task on the farm, collect palm nut and repaired houses. The children did the chores appropriated to them such as fetching of water and firewood, cooking, cleaning, washing of dishes and clothes, looking after children, and going on errands in the locality. In artisan household, the house-help engage in craft production and trade that tend to fit into the household. The trusted ones are usually given special responsibilities such as managing their master's business. The loyal, intelligent and hardworking ones achieve comfortable positions and most often become linked with the families of their masters.

However, despite the important contributions often made by house-helps in their masters' families, most of them are inhumanely treated. As Usman (2020:18) aptly pictures, it is not difficult to spot house-helps from other children whenever they are found. The privileged few among them attend public schools, with their uniforms patched in different places and most times, barefoot. If they manage to put on footwears, such, would be glaringly begging to be replaced. House-helps are usually the first to wake up in their homes, yet, they go late to school because they have to finish piled up domestic chores. Some of them are never with textbooks and when they return home, they never have time to do their homework, except at midnight when other members of the family would be sleeping.

For others who are never given the privilege to go to school, they are usually stuck at home with unending chores as well as taking care of children of their masters. They are often treated as slaves, wearing rags, eating leftovers or once a day. Even when they are given food, it is rationed and are never allowed to eat along with other members of the family. In some cases, they eat in the kitchen or at a corner of the house, and sleeps on the floor. There are many house-helps suffering in Nigeria.



Socio-Economic Impacts of Domestic House-Help

The practice of domestic house-help in Nigeria has several socio-economic impacts on both the child and the society at large. The most common feature shared by house-helps is their uncertain working conditions as a result of domestic work being considered low status job by both the domestic workers and the society. The implication of this, is that despite the enormous amount of works that these house-helps perform for the families they live with, they are still treated as inferior members of the household. As stated earlier, most house-helps are exposed to violence and abuse. To add to their harsh living and working conditions, house-helps have to face the issues of restricted movement, little or no social interaction, sexual abuse and domestic violence. Over time, different house-helps have related how their employers beat them with belts, sticks and electrical cords, knocked their heads against walls, and burnt their skin with iron, chemicals and boiling water. This is the reason why child labour is obviously considered as any form of work likely to have adverse effects on the child's safety, health, and moral development. The practice of house-help in Nigeria has been one that is mentally, physically and morally dangerous and harmful to the children. The house-helps are often denied the opportunity to attend school.

The frequently identified hazards of house-help or child domestic labour include domestic accidents which sometimes lead to death or permanent deformity, physical and emotional assault and abuse, sexual harassment, molestation, overwork, inadequate rest periods, little or no remuneration as well as severe exploitation and drifting into delinquent gangs. Its physical and health consequences include stunted growth and creativity. The social and psychological consequences include isolation of domestic working children from their families and peer groups, stigmatization of work by peers lowering self-esteem of children and perception of relative deprivation. These children are often separated from their families for long periods. Such separations deny them of the parental love, training and care. Often times, they suffer psychologically and emotionally and this, sometimes leads to emotional stress or depression (Gbenga, 2013: 103).

Although narratives on domestic house-helps have always presented its severe negative consequences on both the child and the society, its operation has also generated some positive impacts. Generally, there is nothing wrong with doing work but what is wrong is the way the house-helps are exploited, beaten and sexually abused. Scholars such as Gill (1990:92) and Crusador (1998: 47) have always argued against the total eradication of house-help or child labour worldwide stressing the contributions of these children to the livelihood and income of their families.

It is no gainsaying the fact that a number of domestic house-helps or workers assist in raising some families that were down economically by making financial returns to feed the



rest of the family members. In Umuakanne, Obiti and Awara in Ohaji Local Government Area of Imo State, giving out children for house-help has become a stock in trade. In some cases, parents use the children to defraud the unsuspecting house-help prospectors as they demand certain sum of money from these prospectors and still advise their children to refuse staying with their masters' families after a short while. Apart from feeding, the girl child house-help aids the parents to pay the school fees of the boy sibling from her wages. This is so because parents of these house-helps are often unemployed or under-employed, thus the children's added incomes help relieve them of untold hardship.

It is also significant to note that the institution of domestic house-help gives the children the opportunity of acquiring skills in various areas, thus making them more self-reliant, self-sufficient and responsible adults. Those house-helps who work for affluent people usually do not have any difficulty in home management as it has become part of them.

Implications of Domestic House-Helps on National Development

The implications of children being recruited as house-helps in Nigerian society are worrisome due to the extent of abuse, stress, fatigue and depression which the children incur. These devastating effects impede on the children's health and psyche as there is usually a high connection between good health and human development. A child that is constantly abused physically, psychological, and emotionally develops at nothing and invariably cannot make any meaningful contribution to national development.

Again, because the child has been denied the love and care of the parents, it usually leads to depression, isolation, fear, anger, low self-esteem and violence. A combination of these variable would always encourage unsafe society. This is because the children who see themselves as failure would want to alter the normal run of events in the society and create insecurity, chaos of all kinds, tension and lawlessness.

Moreover, the depriving of children from receiving quality education is dangerous. Good education brings light to the society. A child deprived of basic education and other basic things of life would always lack trust and self-confidence, and as such, would usually grow up with accumulated grievances for his or her family and the society which would be inimical to national development.

Conclusion

The practice of domestic house-help is widespread in Nigeria and has become synonymous with most elite families. These workers as the study reveals work behind closed doors in private homes carrying out domestic chores such as cleaning of rooms and furniture, washing of cloth and plates, cooking of food, running errands, escorting of their employers'



children to and from school, farming and hawking. Although several factors are stated as the causes of domestic house-help but poverty has remained the major cause. Its practice and operation is virtually inimical to national development as it dehumanizes the workers and denies them of their civic right. It is therefore the view of this paper that the government, both state and federal alike, should legislate against the use of under-aged children as domestic house-helps.

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