

Child-fosterage promises and trafficking in children for domestic work in Nigeria: issues and implications for policy



Photo: Mike Bligh

Background and objective

In 2003, Nigeria established the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) to enforce the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) and the Child Rights Act especially as it relates to trafficking in children for labour.

Despite numerous efforts intended to protect against trafficking for child labour including the Child Rights Act and the NAPTIP, Nigerian children are still being trafficked into domestic work under different guises, including child fosterage. Knowledge is limited on how different exchanges of children with or without family involvement for domestic work affect how children are treated and their experiences.

This study aimed to address a gap in understanding how the influence of family involvement in different exchanges of children for domestic work affects how children are treated, and their risk for negative outcomes including abuse and risky sexual behaviours.

The objective of this study was to examine the negative outcomes associated with different fosterage arrangements: those including family involvement among extended family (traditional fosterage), or among adults known to their family (soft trafficking); and those among adults previously unknown to the family and arranged by agents (hard trafficking). The goal of the study was to inform those involved in the development of Nigerian policies and programmes so that negative outcomes identified may be addressed.

Context

Child fosterage is a traditional practice prevalent in some African societies that is initiated by parents as a way to provide their children with alternative residence with extended family members with the intent of providing educational or other opportunities.¹ While child fosterage in African society has been studied extensively and its positive contribution to child upbringing documented,² this traditional practice has been targeted by agents who offer families false promise of fosterage, while instead engaging in trafficking of children for domestic work. In recent years, this spurious practice has been on the increase, placing a growing number of children at risk of involuntary recruitment into domestic work and the risks associated with it.³

¹ Goody J. *Production and Reproduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976.

Caldwell JC, Caldwell P. High fertility in sub-Saharan Africa, *Scientific American*, 1990, 262(5):82-89. Dasgupta P. Population and resources: an exploration of reproductive and environmental externalities. *Population and Development Review*, 200, 26(4):643-689.

² Isiugo-Abanihe UC. Child fosterage in West Africa *Population and Development Review*, 1985, 11, no. 153-73.

³ *The issue of child domestic labor and trafficking in West and Central Africa*, Lagos. New York, UNICEF, 1998.

Study design and methods

Research was conducted between July 2007 and March 2008 among a large population of current and former 18–24-year-old domestic workers in four urban populations (Benin City, Ibadan, Jos and Sokoto) in Nigeria to examine the risks associated with different fosterage arrangements: those including family involvement among extended family (traditional fosterage), or among adults known to their family (soft trafficking); and those among adults previously unknown to the family and arranged by agents (hard trafficking).

Participants were recruited for participation into the study using a multistage, stratified, cluster randomized sampling method. A total of 96 in-depth interviews and 1409 questionnaires were used to collect data from the population of current and former domestic workers. The research instruments included questions to establish their sociodemographic characteristics, experiences with recruitment into domestic work, sexual behaviour and experiences, and nature and experience of abuse.

Findings

Loss of parent common among young domestic workers. More than half of the respondents (54.3%) reported having lost one or both parents before the age of 18.

Considerable proportion has no formal education or vocational training. A large proportion (44.6%) of the domestic workers had no formal education and/or vocational training skills.

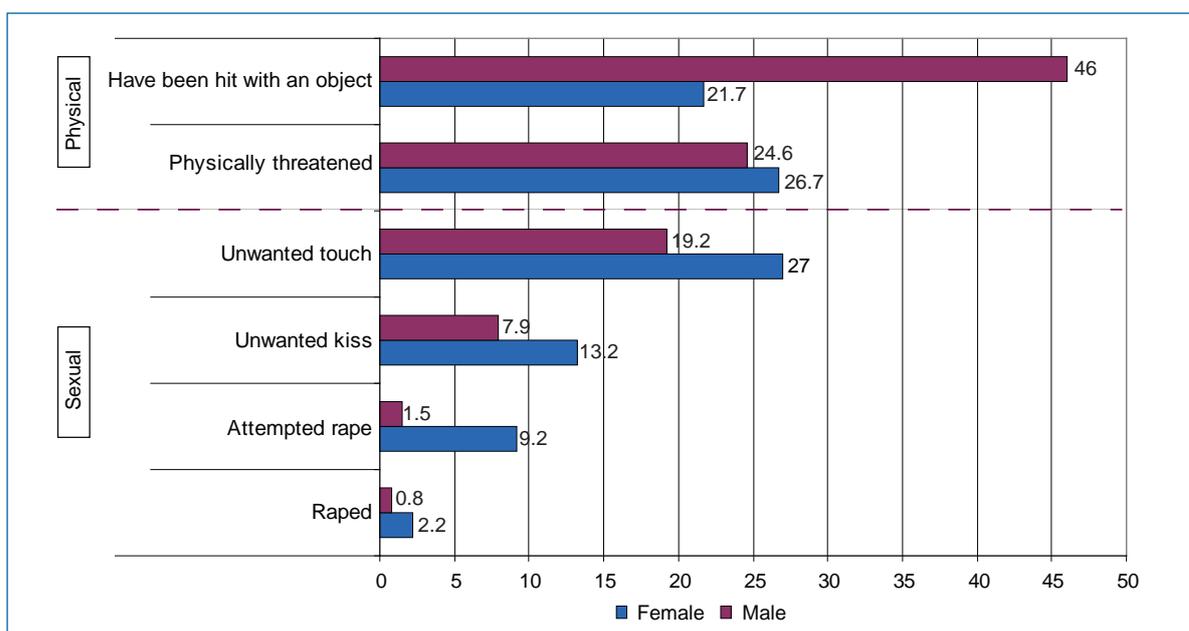
Recruitment into work initiated at young age. Many of the respondents were recruited into domestic work at young ages: 37.8% before the age of 10; 50.7% between 11 and 15 years; while 11.5% were recruited at or above 16 years.

In first employment, soft trafficking arrangement was most common. In their first employment, 55.7% of respondents worked with known adults to their family (soft trafficking arrangement), 31% with extended family members (fosterage arrangement), while 13.5% worked for persons unknown to their families arranged by agents (hard trafficking).

Promises to domestic workers at recruitment were commonly unfulfilled. Promises made to young prospective domestic workers during recruitment included formal (43.4%) or vocational (39.2%) education or good income (17.4%). Among respondents, only 24.7% formal and 30.7% vocational educational promises were fulfilled.

All domestic workers reported having experienced abuse of a physical or sexual nature. Males experienced a greater incidence of physical abuse, while abuse among females was more often sexual. Among the abuses experienced by domestics, 45% were perpetrated by employers or their relatives, 34% perpetrated by neighbours, while 21% were perpetrated by agents including strangers. Figure 1 presents the type of abuse experienced by the sex of respondent domestic worker.

Figure 1. Proportion of young domestic workers reporting some form of abuse, Nigeria 2008.



Severe abuse most common among trafficked domestic workers.

Among the respondents, 46.3% were found to be severely abused (reporting having suffered 4 or more of the 6 abuse types). Risk for suffering severe abuse increased with decreasing influence of family members in the domestic employment arrangement: 35.7% of those working under foster arrangement suffered abuse; 49.8% of those working under soft trafficking arrangement suffered abuse; while 55.4% of those working under hard trafficking arrangement suffered abuse.

Sexual experience and behaviour influenced by type of domestic employment recruitment. Among those domestic workers who reported having had sex, the prevalence of those reporting sex with more than one partner increased when employment arrangements had less influence from family members: 87.9% with hard trafficking experience, 79.0% with soft trafficking experience, and 57.6% with fosterage experience (57.6%) have had sex with more than one partner. Among those who have had sex, use of a condom in the last sexual encounter was 51%: highest among respondents with soft trafficking experience (58.1%), followed by those with hard trafficking experience (44.6), and least among those with fosterage recruitment background (40.5%).

Domestic workers' reports of negative outcomes are influenced by: age at recruitment; opportunities for self-development (formal or vocational education); and the manner of their recruitment into domestic employment.

The younger the age of recruitment, the greater the risk to domestic employees for negative outcomes. The younger the age of recruitment into domestic employment, the greater the likelihood they are to have reported experiencing: severe physical or sexual abuse; ever having had a sexual relationship; having had sex with more than one partner; and having not used a condom at last sex.

Fewer opportunities for domestic workers' self-development increases risk for negative outcomes. The fewer the opportunities that are provided for domestic workers' self-development (vocational or formal education) during their domestic employment the greater their risk for reporting negative outcomes: severe physical or sexual abuse; ever having had a sexual relationship; having had sex with more than one partner; and having not used a condom at last sex.

Hard and soft trafficking further increases domestic employees' risk for negative outcomes. Domestic workers' who were recruited to work with families where the employers were not relatives (soft- and hard-trafficking) were more likely to report negative outcomes: severe physical or sexual abuse; ever having had a sexual relationship; having had sex with more than one partner; and having not used a condom at last sex.

Conclusions and policy implications

Children living with adults other than their biological parents for domestic work irrespective of their mode of recruitment (fosterage, soft trafficking, or hard trafficking) are not guaranteed necessary protection. A considerable proportion of child domestic workers were found to have been victims of sexual or physical abuse, and been exposed to risky sexual behaviour. Fostered domestics were not found to have experienced sufficiently better protection than children recruited through other means: all child domestic workers were found to be at risk for negative outcomes. Thus, child fosterage promises such as paid employment or self-development may no longer be enough reason to separate a child from his/her parent(s) in modern Nigeria.

Awareness must be raised of the real risks associated with children living with adults as domestic workers or foster children. Awareness should be raised among prospective parents and communities so that they better understand the issues affecting children living with adults other than their parents as domestic workers or foster children, and the risks associated with the practice.

More research needs to be done on effective interventions to prevent and respond to the abuse of child domestic workers. The evidence base for preventing and responding to child maltreatment in low- and middle-income countries is currently thin. That for the prevention of and response to the maltreatment of child domestic workers is almost non-existent. Research to determine which strategies work and for whom and in which context should be a priority.

Child domestic workers need greater assistance and protection. Affected children need support in the form of education and vocational skills, access to counselling and reproductive health services, as well as greater protection from employers and relations who offer bogus opportunities and subsequently take advantage of those who seek self-development. Community-based organizations (CBOs/NGOs) might play an important role in supporting this vulnerable population of orphans and children through supporting life skills and educational development, but also in facilitating access to needed sexual and reproductive health services targeted to young domestic workers.

An effective, systematic response to this problem that is sustainable needs to be put in place. The core components of such a response must operate in unison as part of a single system. The following principles can help ensure that a systematic response is designed and implemented effectively:

- A systematic response will function best when it is both multisectoral and coordinated using some formal mechanism, such as a national plan of action or national policy.

- The roles of the different sectors involved in preventing child maltreatment should be clearly specified according to the capacity of each sector (e.g. to gather data and conduct research, provide care services to children, etc.).
- A national coordinating committee and/or lead agency, with representatives from all relevant sectors, can help facilitate the implementation of a systematic response.
- Responsibility for setting up, conducting and monitoring activities to prevent and respond to the maltreatment of child domestic workers should be clearly assigned to central and local government departments with the requisite expertise.
- Those designing plans, policies, programmes and services need to take into account the differential susceptibility of girls and boys to various forms of maltreatment.
- Proper resources, allocated in an appropriate way, are required for research on child maltreatment, for prevention programmes and for care activities.

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