

Linking the Dominance of House Girls in Nigerian Households to the Girl-child Socialization Pattern in Nigeria

J.O. Omokhodion

26, Adeboye Sholanke Avenue, Off Allen Avenue, Ikeja, Lagos State, Nigeria

Abstract: The target of this study is to find out if the preference expressed by many women in search of house-helps; for house-girls, has a direct link with the socialization pattern of the girl-child. The study shows that while girls are socialized to be kind, gentle, patient, loving, passive, hard working and long suffering, boys are socialized to be tough, strong, authoritative and never to cry; since only girls are supposed to cry. The findings from this study shows that over 90% of women, seeking the services of house-helps usually prefer the services of house-girls, because they have been trained to clean, cook, take care of their younger siblings, be gentle, obedient and kind. The natural consequence of this is that they try to imbibe those attributes which they have been taught, since those are the criteria on which they will be assessed in their society. Thus, since these are the attributes that people need from their house helps, they prefer the girl-child to boys for employment. This thus exposes the girl-child to a lot of exploitation by their families and their employer's family. This is even more so because most of their earnings go to their families; not themselves. The study ends by recommending that both boys and girls should have similar socialization pattern and that government should intensify its efforts at eradication child labor and exploitation.

Key words: Girl child socialization and dominance of Housegirls

INTRODUCTION

A house-girl is a girl child, who is employed to work in the households of families from higher socio-economic status than her family. In return the employers pay her a wage or simply socialize/educate or give her the training her family can not afford. The house-girl is usually ill-treated as an outsider and her enjoyment or access to any facility in the home of her employer is at the pleasure of her "Oga" or even their children in some cases. The house girl is usually made to perform all the household chores; including taking care of the children; both when the employers are at home or at work. She also does the laundry and goes on errands. This is a unique type of child labor.

Background: Nigeria which is the most populous African country in the world, with its population at over 140 million, is a multi-cultural, multi-tribal, multi-lingual and multi-ethnic society. Thus the various groups have different folkways, mores, norms, values, attitudes, languages and dialects. This poses a lot of problems with the creation/emergence of a national/super culture. Thus, people have more of tribal, ethnic allegiance as opposed to national allegiance. Also Nigeria is a strongly stratified country; with a handful of people who can rank among the wealthiest in the world and the masses down; who can rank among the poorest in the world; with each person living on less than one (US) Dollar a day on the average.

The problem: The unique situation of Nigeria has led to anomie and the improvisation of different types of

survival techniques, have led to a lot of human and child trafficking, kidnapping, ritual murder and a higher number of female children who are not in school, but in the labor market as "house girls" This paper, therefore wishes to find out why there are more house girls than houseboys in households and why more people prefer house girls to house boys. It will also try to find out some of the reasons for the preference of girls as house servants and make appropriate suggestions for the reversal of this trend.

Child labor: The International Labor Organization (ILO) estimates that about 218 million children; between the ages of five and seventeen years are engaged in both paid and unpaid labor in the developing countries of the world. Out of this number about 1223 million children work in Asia-Pacific region, 49.3 million work in Sub-Saharan Africa and 5.7 million work in Latin America and Caribbean (Human Right Watch, 2006). In the rural areas most children laborers work in the farms, while in the urban areas they work as domestic servants and in trading. Other jobs for which many under-aged children are employed include factory work, military, prostitutes, child actors, child singers and seasonal agricultural workers, during school holidays.

Girl child socialization in nigeria: The girl-child is usually given the socialization/orientation of a home-maker, who must do household chores and look after other members of the family. She is expected to help her mother to take care of her younger siblings and hold fort for her mother whenever she is away from home.

The domestication of the girl-child makes them preferable as house servants. Some of these girls work from dawn to dusk with very little food. Some are abused by both the female boss (mistress) and her husband. The father of the house (master); would sometimes rape and impregnate the girl while the mistress would spank her thoroughly and send her back to her family (Kidran, 1986), concludes that "rape is probably the most under-reported, fastest growing and least convicted crime in the world".

House girls and house boys in west africa: The incidence of house girls and house boys is as old as the people and culture of West Africa. In earlier times it was linked to the apprenticeship system; when children were sent to the homes of traders, blacksmiths and other professionals to live with them and learn their trade. In return these children work in both the household and workshops of their bosses, but a lot of time, they remain as ill-treated and under-fed outsider.

In line with this, families now send out their children to work and earn some money for their families or themselves. Thus while some girls and boys are sent out to other households to work and earn a wage, others are sent out to live with wealthier households in return for western formal education, which their families could not afford.

A lot of human trafficking takes place in West Africa as number of households in Nigerian urban centers have house helps from Benin Republic, Togo, Cameroon and Ghana; in addition to the majority from all over Nigeria (especially Southern Nigeria).

Many of the house-girls are children as they are people under the age of 18 years. Ideally, these girls should be in school, but poverty is probably responsible for their being farmed out as house-girls. Some of them come from homes where the children are so many that their parents cannot cater for them. Such parents need the money the children earn for their upkeep and sometimes the education of their sons.

In his study of 112 house-helps (house-boys and house-girls) in Enugu, Okahialam, (1994), discovered that most of them were transported from neighboring villages to Enugu. According to Okahialam, 25% of the children were less than eight years of age, 20% were between 9-11 years, while 70% were girls. Most employers prefer girls because the girls are said to be more domesticated and honest.

Sama Lang, (2003), also found out that sometimes children are exploited by their parents (either for survival or greed) as they terminate their schooling and engage them in economic activities, retail trading, wares hawking, or working as house girls or house boys.

The girl-child is usually preferred as domestic servants (house girls) in homes because, by her gender and cultural-based socialization; the woman in her will make her perform the household chores better than the boys; especially in child tending and house keeping. This is because by the girl-child's socialization, she is usually

too frightened to complain about any maltreatment for fear of reprisal (Sama Lang, 2003).

Young house girls are also usually sexually exploited by their employers, e.g. the case of a man and his grand son consistently raping a 10 year old house girl in Banga Bakundu, Cameroon, on different days. The girl was too scared to report for a long time, but had to tell her mother one day; who then reported the case to their village Chief (CRTV Buea Station, 6 p.m. News, 13th June, 2000). Girls who have been sexually abused as young girls, have been known to end up in prostitution as a profession (Omokhodion, 2008).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A ten item interview guide was utilized for the collection of data from the house-helps and the employment agents. This is because most of the house-helps are non-literate, and it would have been very difficult to make them fill any questionnaire; structured or unstructured. Besides, they did not seem to have any time budget for our questions.

These items include questions on who collects the house-help's wages, how much their wage is (where available), the house-help's gender, their country of origin, the house-helps ages, school attendance, components of the girl-child's socialization, components of the boys' socialization, how house-helps are given out and gender preference by house-help seekers.

The analysis of the data was done by the use of simple percentages.

RESULTS

From a total of 100 households surveyed in Lagos Metropolitan area, 121 house-helps were found, as some of the households had more than one house-help. 116 were females, while 5 were males.

It was very difficult and dangerous undertaking this research as many of the employers interrogated us extensively; were usually very suspicious of our motives and gave strict instructions to their house-helps never to talk to "strangers" like us again. In spite of this however, since the questions were very few, we were able to sometimes get our information by tipping and using bread sellers, security men, orange sellers and occasionally by making friends with the house-helps themselves. Thus the questions were restricted to those on their ages, wages, who collects their wages, ethnic group, attendance at school, country of origin and general feeling.

To the question on wages, the response revealed that the wages ranged between N2,000.00 and N8,000.00 per month, while some were not earning wages, but were supposed to go to school or learn a trade (through the apprenticeship system). In answer to the question on who collects their wages, 115 of the house-helps said that their wages were usually collected by their relations (uncles, fathers, mothers, aunties, brothers and sisters). These

wages were either paid/collected monthly or paid yearly in advance as in the cases of those from Benin Republic. Six of them all males and one female said that they collect their wages themselves and are saving them to start their own businesses.

As for their country of origin, 102 are from Southern Nigeria, 5 are from the middle belt of Nigeria (thus 107 are Nigerians), while the remaining 6 are from Benin Republic. The ages of these house-helps ranged from about 7 years to about 25 years (approximately). 16 of them are attending school (12 girls and 4 boys); 9 in primary school and 7 in secondary school.

In answer to the question on how these house-helps are recruited/employed, it was discovered that

- some are given out by their parents to people who promise to educate them through formal schooling or train them through the apprenticeship system.
- Some of these children are kidnapped and sold out or transported out of their usual environment for exploitation.
- Some are given out by other relatives like uncles, aunts, grandparents or cousins.

Also an informal survey among four men who act as employment agents for women desiring the services of house helps or nannies show that most of the women seeking house helps prefer the girl child, because she has been socialized to do household chores, take care of children and clean the home. The girl child is socialized to be kind, gentle, cook meals well and patient (long-suffering).

On the contrary, boys are socialized to be tough, proud, independent, "bossy" and be generally "in charge". They are trained not to show emotions and told that child care, house work and cooking is the exclusive work of women. They also lack the patience and gentleness; required for the care of children. Thus the behavior of both the girl child and boys can be traced to their socialization.

DISCUSSION

The implication of the differential socialization components of the girl child and boys thus become a self-fulfilling prophesy, as shown above. This is so because, the society through their cultural prescriptions determines that girls must be gentle, hard working, submissive and patient, while boys must be tough, bold, bossy and never show emotions. Thus the society prescribes the components of their socialization; which they imbibe and make them turn out as society wants or predicts. This happens because this is the only way that they can have the acceptance of their various societies/communities. The implication of this self-fulfilling prophesy is that if the society determines that all boys should be trained to be gentle, loving, patient (long-suffering) and kind, they will imbibe these attributes, since this will be the only way to gain acceptance in their societies and escape the label of "deviance".

RECOMMENDATION

Societies should give similar socialization/training to both boys and girls, so that, at every point in time, they will usually be equally advantaged or disadvantaged.

REFERENCES

- CRTC Buea Station, 6.00 p. m. News, 13th June, 2000. (in page 6 of the text)
- Kadiran, O., 1986. Rape: An Under-reported Crime in Nigeria. *The Lagos Law J.*, 4(6).
- Okahialam, C. 1994. Domestic Servants in Eastern Nigeria. *Enugu Law J.*, 2(7).
- Omokhodion, J.O. 2008. How Female Socialization Encourages Prostitution in Lagos State. *J. Sociol. Edu.*, 1(1).
- Sama-Lang, I. F. (2003) Child Worker and The Law in Cameroon. A Case Study of the Girl Child as Domestic Servant in Woruggi. *The Calabar Law J.*, 6(7): 103-126