# Child abandonment and the question of child rights: a study of Skolombo boys and Lakasara girls of Calabar, cross rivers state, Nigeria

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*Abstract*

In this study, we want to examine reasons for the pervasiveness of the practice of child abandonment, using the "Skolombo Boys and Lakasara Girls'' in Calabar, the state capital of Cross River State, Nigeria, as the analytical context. Globally, there are approximately 150 million children roaming the street without care or shelter (United Nation Educational Scientific and Cultural Organizations, 2017).  These children are chased from their respective home by violence, drug and alcohol use and abuse, death of either or both parents, family dysfunction, war, natural disaster, insurgency or simply socio-economic collapse. Many of these street children are forced to fend for living on the streets, scavenging, begging, hawking in the slums and polluted cities of the developing world like Nigeria. Considering the socioeconomic risks of these children, especially the "Skolombo Boys" and Lakesera Girls in Calabar, these street children are at risk from exploitation, abuse and security personnel violence, but the most vulnerable are those who actually sleep and live on the streets, hiding under bridges, in gutters and in the market. While these children may have small jobs such as market-selling or shoe shining to pull through, many end up dying on the pavement, being victims of drugs, infectious diseases and gang rivalry., It is therefore probable to find out why Nigeria, despite one of the signatories to the Child Rights Convention of the United Nations of human rights treaty, has not duly taken to cognizance the practice of the Child Rights? Rather the nation ironically has a large pool of children on the streets, either engaging on street trading or living entirely on the street as a result of abandonment. The answers to these questions tend to shed light on the gaps that have hitherto been neglected by the Child Rights literature, conflicts resolutions, and development studies because no major studies have emerged to interrogate this phenomenon. What exists are mainly in some reports on the pages of newspapers and magazines.

*Key words:* child, girls, boys, abandonment.

## Introduction

The convention on child rights, as enacted by United Nations as a human rights treaty, sets out the political, social, economic, civil, health and cultural rights of a child.  It defines a child as any human being under the age of eighteen, unless the age of majority is attained earlier under national legislation (United Nations, 1990). The convention acknowledges the rights of children to freedom of expression and to have their opinions heard and acted upon; protection from abuse or exploitation; rights to privacy and prohibition of excessive interference (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 2011). Several countries of the world are signatories to the convention, and by so doing, bounded by the provisions.

However, in spite of the provisions of the convention, street children, consequent on abandonment, continue to be in increase and have become a major global problem to the

extent that there is no country in the world without the presence of street children. It is a product of modern complex or contemporary urban environments and it represents one of our most serious global challenges. A global picture presented by the Consortium for Street Children (2016), the statistics shows that 2.5 million homeless children are found in United State per year and about 1,425 in Ireland. There are about 7,800 children working in markets as vendors in Benin Republic, over 60 percent of children live and work on the street every day in Malawi. While in Uganda 44 percent of street children connect with the street between 5 and 10 years old. Mauritius has about 6,780 children on the street and in Nigeria 1.2 million of children is out of homes. In fact, according to the UNICEF (2016), there are up to 150 million street children in the world today.

Nigeria is a signatory to the Child Rights Convention but ironically has a large pool of children in the streets, either engaging in street trading or living entirely in the street as a result of abandonment. One of the proven cases of child abandonment is that of Skolombo Boys and Lakasara girls of Calabar in Southern Nigeria. They are a group of young children who have been dumped on the streets by their parents on accusation of witchcraft. While the existence of these children has constituted social menace onto the society and also border on the question of child right as enunciated in the United Nations Convention, little is being done to redress the situation. Also, majority of these children were accused of witch-crafting through spiritual pronouncement of some churches and hence were sent out of their homes and rejected by the community. The society seems to have accepted the practice and more children are accused of witchcraft and then pushed to the street. Thus, arise the need for discourses on the Skolobo Boys and Lakasara Girls within the context of child right and social inclusion.

## Results and discussion

### United Nations Conventions on Child Rights

In 1989 Nigeria ratified the United Nations convention on child's rights, to serve as a legal documentation and protection of child rights and responsibilities and this was domesticated in 2003 as child rights act. This law specifies the rights and responsibilities of children and the duties and obligations of government, families and the authorities to uphold children rights. According to Section 14 and 15 of the child right bill, which states (i) that no child shall be separated from his parents against the wish of the child except for educational and welfare purpose, and in the exercise of a judicial determination in accordance with the provisions of this act , in the best interest of the child (ii) every child has the right to maintenance by his parents or guardians in accordance with the extent of their means and the child has the right, in appropriate circumstances to enforce this right in the family court. The sub-sections of section 15 state the right of a child to free, compulsory and universal basic education, in which its provision shall be the duty of the government. Seven years after this act, cross rivers state among other twenty-three states passed the act for onward enforcement. This would mean that children are well protected and a breach of such act attracts a punishment to the offender in such states.

However, the case of children in Calabar of Cross Rivers State is of great concern, as most children are witch/wizard branded and abandoned as a result of church and spiritual pronouncement, hence these children sought out their livings on the streets. Street children of these kind in Calabar, have metamorphosed to a set of gangs popularly known as the "Skolombo boys" while the girls' are referring to as "Lakasara girls". A gang of local children between 5 and 15 years of age. The Skolombo boys initially were seen to be harmless but later grew to be called Isakaba in 2007, and by 2008 they had become a menace. In most cases, the skolombo boys move in groups. They operate like beggars hanging around street corners but later they started carrying guns and ammunition, and they are getting more

dangerous as they grow bigger and mature with street life. The Lakasara girls are exposed to petty crimes and are sometimes raped by their male colleagues and other unscrupulous men. This result to infections and unwanted pregnancy, consequently, the killing and dumping of babies in the trash can and on the street, since they lack the financial resources to cater for them. Skolombo boys and Lakasara girls are always in clusters in the street of Calabar in places such as, cultural centre complex, cenotaph (eleven–eleven rounds about), Flour mill junction and so on. One interesting feature of these children is the sense of communality which enable them to fight and defend one another from intruders and other hostile street children, although that do not separate them from disagreement and fights (Premium Time Daily, 2016). The phenomenon of the Skolombo boys and Lakasara girls represents a major example of child abandonment, which bears negatively on the societal values and respect for children. It also tells on the responsibility of the state that allows such a practice to continue, in spite of being a signatory to Child Right Law. Children have been facing serious ejection from homes and the society at large due to witch craft accusation, homelessness, poverty, failed educational system, family problems, amongst others. These expose them to various forms of abuse or risk ranging from economic abuse or risk, such as road side hawking, begging, kidnapping); social risk (increase in robbery activities and instrument of disruption in the society) to psychological abuse (sexual abuse, torture) which are detrimental to the growth and well being of the children (Humanium, 2015) and the denial of parental love and care, which leads to lack of educational need, indecent living and parental guidance.

The traditional people (native) see many issues contained in the act as an aberration from the norms of the society. For example, a witch branded child is accused as the sole cause of the predicaments of the parents which leads to the eventual ejection of the child. Amongst other critiques, the native refused to recognise the act in regards of; who a child is, what qualifies a boy or girl as a child, the age range, and the stage of puberty which they believe is relative to each community. Also, particularly in the area of child circumcision (genital mutilation) for female and as well male as this is against the main traditional practice of the native till date. Thus, it is doubtful if the act would eliminate this practice among the people. Also, the effectiveness of this act depends on the native people's knowledge and readiness to resort to this act. Hence, the question is how effective is the child rights law in Calabar given the presence of Skolombo boys and Lakasara girls? And to what extent are the child rights in Calabar, cross rivers state protected and enforced? How do Skolombo boys and Lakasara girls evaluate their experiences and expectations as it relates to their rights?

Although, the claim of the native in Calabar is that these children are witches and wizards, but efforts to rehabilitate many of these children by non-governmental organization, such as Mother against Child Abandonment (MACA), Partnership Opportunities for Women Empowerment Realization (POWER) amongst others were met with discouragement. For every one child taken into rehabilitation, three more children are out there. So new street children join this gang and roam the street. While the successful one in trade and education has been reconciled with their families. The question is, is it poverty or lack of economic capabilities that led to this abandonment or witch-crafting? In line with this Mthombeni (2010) opine that the presence of street children are due to poverty, total breakdown of the family system, unemployment and the neglect of motherly role due to the need to complement or meet up with family financial responsibilities. Moreover, the adoption of child rights act is one thing, its implementation is another thing. Also, policy implementation is as good as programme implementation. Thus, what are the immediate and remote factors that hinder the implementation of this act? What are the effects/risks (economic, psychological and social) of child violation on Skolombo boys and Lakasara girls and the society at large? What are the depth and diversities of Skolombo boys'

experiences from the perspective of themselves?

**Theoretical Framework: Social Disorganization Theory (SDT)**

This study is anchored on Social Disorganisation Theory. This theory was developed by renowned researchers of criminologist, Clifford Shaw and Henry D. McKay from Chicago School of criminology in 1942. According to this theory, a person's physical and social environments are primarily responsible for the behavioural choices that a person makes. Hence, location is an important factor in Social Disorganization theory, particularly when it comes to predicting illegal activity (Bond, 2015). Poverty, physical dilapidation and higher level of ethnic and culture mixing are common problems with high crime rate neighbourhood Shaw and McKay (1969). The study furthered claimed that delinquency was not produced at the individual level, but is a usual response by normal individuals to abnormal situations.

According to the authors, there are other common characteristics in the environment such as a highly transient population, meaning that people constantly move in and out of the area, as well as unemployment among residents of the neighbourhood. These common problems or other factors tend to lead to a breakdown in social organization which is why it is referred to as the theory of social disorganization. Specifically, it is predicted that factors such as heterogeneity, physical dilapidation and poverty lead to a state of social disorganisation, which in turn leads to crime and delinquency (Schram, 2018). Implying that, residents of neighbourhood that have high rate of poverty, and culturally mixed residents in a dilapidated area cannot come together to solve problems, such as delinquency among children.

**Overview of Street Children in the World**

Globally, there were approximately 150 million children roaming the street without care or shelter (United Nation Educational Scientific and Cultural Organizations, 2017). These children are chased from their respective home by violence, drug and alcohol use and abuse, death of either or both parent, family dysfunction, war, natural disaster, insurgency or simply socio-economic collapse. Many of these street children are forced to fend for living in the streets, scavenging, begging, hawking in the slums and polluted cities of the developing world like Nigeria.

Sociological and psychological studies on street children reveal the dangers and the risks as consequences associated with these category of children (Chanwi, 2014). The distinctive difference between the two is that findings and interpretations are based on empirical evidence. These children, many times demonstrate bravery and hopelessness (Verma, 1999), lacking resources but savvy in obtaining them (Aptekar & Heinonen, 2003). According to (Steve, 2017), these children lack an accepted role by the family and society at large, the needed affection (Mills, 1987) and care by their parents or significant others, consequently are at the hard lane trending dangerously on the part of risky behaviour. Similarly, studies have shown that several factors are responsible for ending up as street children. According to Baker and Panter (1997), due to family problems such as alcoholism, mental, physical and social abuses, or parental neglect motivates them to leave home. In addition, economic reasons, excessive workload, family stress and a desire for independence, most of the children especially boys leave home before the age of 12.

Considering the socioeconomic risks of these children, especially the "Skolombo Boys" in Calabar, the state capital of Cross River state, Nigeria, these street children are at risk from exploitation, abuse and security personnel violence, but the most vulnerable are those who actually sleep and live on the streets, hiding under bridges, in gutters, in the market. While these children may have small jobs such as market-selling or shoe shining to pull through, many end up dying on the pavement, being victims of drugs, infectious diseases and gang rivalry, as reported on daily newspapers (UNESCO, 2017). Without some form of basic education and economic training, the future is uncertain for these street children and their life expectancy terrifyingly low. However, it was gathered that there was a high prevalence of violence against children in Nigeria. UNICEF,

(2014) report noted that, "approximately six out of 10 children experience some form of violence, while half of all children experience physical violence".

### Study Design and Methodology

A Community based Participatory Research (CBPR) approach is used for this study. This approach allows for thorough engagement with the community people thereby a facilitating generation of local knowledge that can easily bring the desired change (O'Fallen & Dearry, 2002; Flicker, 2006). The CBPR gives preeminence to the voices, values and opinions of the people concerned through equitable participation of the researcher, the people involved and important stakeholders associated with the issue. As a result of this active involvement in the research process members of the community becomes empowered and are better positioned to become agents of enduring individual and societal change. It is a shift from the conventional research where research is conducted "on" the participants, rather in this case "with' the participants (Higginbottom and Liamputtong, 2007). It will adopt a mixed method design whereby data will be collected and analyzed through both quantitative and qualitative approaches. This approach will allow for triangulation of findings Creswell, (2007).

Calabar, the state capital of Cross River State is in the oil rich south-south region of Nigeria. It is often described as the "capital of tourism" in Nigeria owing to the different attraction and points and festivals. However, Calabar has a long history of superstitious beliefs with regards to labelling children as witches or wizards. This has led primarily to child abandonment and death over the years aside from other contemporary factors such as dysfunctional family and poverty to mention a few.

The population of the study comprises of total group of people from which the researcher is interested in gaining information and from which subsequent analysis and interpretation and drawn. Hence, the population of this study is the people of Calabar, in Cross River State, Nigeria. The target population is the Skolombo boys and the Lakasara girls (the street children).

The Secondary target includes all members of the local community comprising of religious leaders and organizations, Governmental and Non-governmental bodies that have been involved with these children in the past as well as other important stakeholders.

The non-probabilistic sampling procedures namely snowball and purposive will be employed for this study. The snowball sampling procedure will be used in selecting the street children for this study. This is of importance to this study because it will allow for referral from the initial participants to generate more participants, thereby giving us access to their homes and hideouts. While the purposive technique will be used in selecting stakeholders, community leaders that will be of utmost relevance to this study.

Given the core characteristic of community Based Participatory Research that enables community residents to actively participate throughout the research process, that is, from conception to the design, conduct, analysis, interpretation, conclusions even to the communication of outcome stage. Therefore, instruments to be used for data collection will be designed in partnership with the community members and use within the same population. However, methods such as literature review on existing activities and intervention's, asset mapping manuals, evaluative questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussion, video documentary and photographs will be used as deemed fit.

As it is with CBPR, meaning making takes place in collaboration with community members. Thematic analysis will be used in analysing data the generated from this study. Creswell, Hanson, Clark Plano, & Morales, (2007) explained that thematic analysis requires transcribing voice notes from the interview, reading and familiarisation with items from the documents and transcribed interviews. As the data generation and collection proceeds emerging codes will be identified, fine-tuned and sharpened in a reiterative manner until the categories and themes are finally generated.

## Conclusions

Skolombo boys and Lakasara girls are found to operate in a typical gang member who came from probably from dysfunctional and destitute families, and may have family members with criminal histories, and lack adequate educational and vocational role models, the paper identifies the forces that drive children into gangs or criminal behavior. Since the rights of these children are neither known to them nor protected, they may likely be pushed into membership by poverty and minority status. Those in this category are likely be the most marginal/vulnerable children in the neighborhoods and are the abandoned by their family members. Directly or indirectly, these children would experience some forms of psychological, economic, cultural, or social stressors which hinder their lives. Social disorganization theory is commonly used as an important predictor of youth crime and violence. Also, despite the pervasiveness of the practice of child abandonment in this locality, no major studies have emerged to interrogate this phenomenon. What exists are mainly in some reports in newspapers and magazines.

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