
Cultural Cohabitation and Child Neglect Among Kalabari People

Child neglect which is a form of child maltreatment that has remained problematic in the social science research. It makes up 75 percent cases of child abuse with huge tendency of reoccurrence (CBS News September 13, 2013). It refers to an act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caregiver, as result of which death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse or exploitation of a child occurs, or an act or failure to act which render a child susceptible to serious harm (CAPTA, 2003). The quest to restore the child's personality has resulted in the springing up of policies, acts, laws, and scholarly researches in across nations of the world.

One of the challenges of the social sciences academic discourse in contemporary Africa today is to explain the syndrome of cohabitation. In almost a radical departure from marriage, the present is characterized by widespread cohabitation which is a fairly recent phenomenon Karney, Beckett, Collins & Shaw, (2007) cited in Ogunsola (2011). Cohabitation refers to two independent people, almost like roommates, living together and having sex, instead of a commitment to one another for the rest of their lives (Rena, 2006). It is the union of unmarried partners; both same-sex, and heterosexual, in a sexually intimate relationship on a long-term or permanent basis which is against the norms and values of Nigerian cultural groups. The trend of cohabitation witnessed a drastic change towards the last decades of the twentieth century as marriages began to be preceded by it (Ogunsola, 2011). According to Campbell (2008) cited in Ogunsola, (2011), marriages frequently started to be supplanted by cohabitation that often ends in divorce in one-third of the time, and where three-quarters of the breakups are always requested by the woman. In recent times, the young adults seem to begin to consider premarital cohabitation as a substitute for marriage. It has become a major social problem in the past 25 years. Its upsurge spans both side of the Atlantic Ocean, and even most parts of the Western industrialized world. Religious groups seem perplexed, if not paralyzed in their response to the syndrome. Many of them identify cohabitation as the most difficult issue they deal with in marriage preparation programs and pre-marriage counseling (National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2000).

Cohabitation syndrome is one of the most recent social problems in Nigeria which has attracted the attention of scholars (Esere, Idowu, Durosaro & Omotosho, 2009; Tiziana, & Chiara, 2010; Animasahu & Fatile 2011; Ogunsola 2011; Omega 2013; Bello & Ogunsanwo 2013). However, it has not been sufficiently x-rayed. Although this problem is a worldwide phenomenon (Bumpass & Lu 1998; Popenoe & Whitehead 1999), its current upsurge in Nigeria and the negative consequences it has on the products of such union makes it a serious social problem

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that requires attention. The worrisome nature of this social problem is exemplified by the large array of media reports of cases of cohabitation and its aftermath on parental responsibility recorded in different parts of the country (Evelyn & Whiteheads 1981; Thatcher, 2002). The more significant concern, however, is that cohabitation has considerably weakened the internal coherence of marriage and family life, and the inhumane crisis that follow, exacerbate conditions of child neglect (De Vaus, Qu & Brow, 2003; Mattox, 1998).

Although, there are no obtainable domestic statistics on the recorded cases of cohabiting partners in Nigeria, occasional State reports from different parts of the country indicate the alarming rate at which this deviant act is being perpetrated. For instance, the register of the welfare unit of the Rivers State Ministry of Women Affairs, Community Development and Social Welfare in Port-Harcourt indicates that types of parent-child relationship, type of home and peer group influence were effective in explaining street children's practices in Nigerian setting. Similarly, in a related development, the Special Adviser to the Lagos State Government on Youth and Social Development recently revealed that Lagos State in 2011 recorded 497 cases of abandoned babies dumped in different streets of the state (Okoje, 2012). In Ojedokun & Atoi (2012:P1). This is guessed to be mostly a by-product of the numerous cohabiting partners in the state, since there is hardly any good headed married partners who would want to abandon their child. The current increase in the incidence of cohabitation in Nigeria is a clear departure from Nigerian and African traditional socio-cultural values that attach great importance to family formation, child bearing and child rearing, where childbirth is normatively expected of every legal union of partners of opposite sex, and where marriage is considered a treasure that is passionately desired. Nigerians believe that it is very important for a man and a woman who are legally married to stay together and have children because they represent a symbol of wealth and ensure the continuity of the family's descent (Zeitlin, 1996). Oyewumi 2003, as cited in Frimpong-Nnuroh, (2004) argues that legal motherhood occupies a special place in African cultures and societies, because it serves as the essential building block of social relationships, identities, and society as a whole. The legal union of partners and the birth of a baby were, and are still not only a family event but a celebration of the whole community (Maposa & Rusinga, 2012).

Cohabitation becomes problematic because it is unethical and grossly violates the dignity and sanctity of family formation and the life of the most vulnerable members of the society who are products of this deviant act. This act contravenes the Nigerian Marriage Act, Cap 218, law of the federation which stipulates certain preliminary requirements which are to be fulfilled before persons of the opposite sex can be unionized. Persons wishing to get married pursuant to the Act must thereby comply with the legal requirements under the Act; non-compliance of which will invalidate the marriage". It also contradicts the biblical intentions for marriage, among which are "to provide a Godly ordained companionship among husband, wife and children that is based on trust, intimacy and fidelity" (Gen. 2:18, 24-25); and to have sexual relationship within

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the boundaries of marriage only, thereby protecting the emotions and character of one's spouse (Pro. 5:20-23; 6:27-35; Cor. 7:1-5) as in (Odunze, 1991). Despite the perennial occurrence of incidents of cohabitation in Nigeria and the attendant social damage it usually generates, this social problem, however, is yet to command sufficient scholarly attention in Nigeria. This study was therefore conceived to increase the state of knowledge on this problem and to call attention to the need to examine the linkage between the cohabitation of un-married couples and child neglect.

Scholars have x-rayed extensively the causal determinants to have included: "poverty (Basu, 1999; O'Dannell et al. 2005; Edmonds & Pavcnik, 2005; Bhat & Rather, 2009; Rena, 2009; Akarro & Mtweve, 2011; Lena, O. 2014; Okafor, 2010; I.L.O, 2012/2013), illiteracy on the side of the parents, polygamy and the act of excessive child bearing (Vandenberg, 2007; Ahamd, 2012; boyden J & myers, 1998; Okpukpara et al., 2006) death of parent, war and epidemics (Yudav & Sengupta, 2009; Serwadda-Luwaga, 2005), urban migration (BBC, 2013), corruption (Murphy, 2005; Onyemachi, 2010; United Nations Development Programme, 2012) etc. Nevertheless, more needs to be done, which includes drawing attention to the foundations of the union that produces these vulnerable children. This study is geared towards un-covering the link between family formation such as cohabitation and child neglect in Nigeria; using the kalabari people in Port Harcourt as a case study.

Theoretical Framework: Individualization Theory

Giddens, Becks' and Beck Gernsheims' individualization theory (Giddens 1992; Beck 1992; Beck and Beck Gernsheim 2002); In (Tiziana, Chiara, 2010p5 provided appropriate explanation for the linkage between cohabitation of unmarried partners and child neglect. These interactive perspective, seek to explain cohabitation as a process through which family tie and parental responsibility are weakened.

According to this theory, preference for cohabitation over marriage is the result of growing individualization (Mills 2000). Individuals are no longer willing to enter institutionalized and long term binding relationships. When they enter a couple relationships, they prefer to cohabit, rather than marrying, because they wish to keep their options and their negotiations open (e.g. Wu 2000; Oppenheimer 2003). But this has consequences on child-parent relationships. Since it is not institutionalized, cohabitation does not construct cross-couple parental obligations. Each partner does not feel specific moral or social obligations towards the other partners' which include the children. If each partner keeps in contact with his/her children separately, overall frequency of contacts will be almost automatically reduced. Even more so, since it is women who, in marriage, often keep – or mediate - contact also between their husbands and their in children. If in a cohabitation women do not perform this kin work (or do it less), the children's parental relations may be comparatively reduced.

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The relevance of the individualization theory to this study is obvious as it showcases how cohabitation of unmarried partners weakens family bond. The pain of this loosed bond, is often melted upon the vulnerable “children” members of such union who may not just be denied parental care, but may also be neglected or even abandoned.

Social Disorganization Theory

Edwin Sutherland in 1947 proposed the failure of families and extended kin groups expands the realm of relationships no longer controlled by the community, and undermines governmental controls. This leads to persistent "systematic" crime and delinquency. He also believed that such disorganization causes and reinforces the cultural traditions and cultural conflicts that support antisocial activity. The systematic quality of the behavior was a reference to repetitive, patterned or organized offending as opposed to random events. He depicted the law-abiding culture as dominant as and more extensive than alternative criminogenic cultural views and capable of overcoming systematic crime if organized for that purpose.

The application of this, to the study is hinged on the disorganization perspective by Edwin (1947:11). This theory indeed captures the thrust of this study as it correlates the cultural traditions and cultural conflicts that support antisocial activity. When a community fails to abide by the dominant and extensive means of family formation, and rather opt for an alternative; the family, being founded on a faulty ground is more likely to fail in its duty of parenting; resulting to child neglect.

The hall mark of this theory as I have mentioned earlier is to revamp the dominant culture of family formation, which is marriage; and abolish the criminogenic culture (cohabitation). Thereby, reorganizing the family for what it is meant for (parenting), and avoiding crimes such as child neglect.

Setting and Methods

The study is purely exploratory, adopting quantitative and qualitative methods for the purpose of data collection. Qualitative data were obtained through In-depth interview and focus group discussion methods, while quantitative data were collected through the use of questionnaire (open ended). A random sampling technique was adopted for the selection of three (3) popular areas within the Port-Harcourt metropolis, while snowball sampling technique was adopted for the selection of two hundred (200) respondents. The respondents were chosen based on the previously established quota, which considers marital status, religious affiliation, and ethnic group. Both single and married respondent, who were natives of kalabari, but resides in Port Harcourt; were involved, In-depth interviews were conducted with 20 market women, while 5

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different sessions of focus group discussion of seven participants were conducted with the native chiefs and staffs of the family welfare unit. At the analysis stage, quantitative data were analyzed through Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) using frequency distribution tables and simple percentages. While tape-recorded data were transcribed and interpreted through content analysis and ethnographic summaries. Content analysis was used to explore and interpret the emerging patterns in the collected data and ethnographic summary was employed to further enhance data interpretation.

The study was conducted among the natives of kalabari in three selected popular areas in Port-Harcourt. The areas include the Borokiri (New layout), Old Government Reserved Area (Old GRA), and Diobu (Port Harcourt Urban) areas. Port Harcourt is the capital of Rivers State, Nigeria. It lies along the Bonny River and is located in the Niger Delta. Port Harcourt has a population of 1,382,592 (National Population Commission of Nigeria, 2007). Port-Harcourt was used for this study because it is one of the most congested cities in Nigeria due to urban migration, resulting in increase in cohabitation and consensual (Emma, Okoye, Elizabeth, 2010). It also puts up for the states numerous ethnic groups with diverse cultural practices, especially as it concerns family formation and child care.

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