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Women and the Upsurge of “Baby factories” in Southeastern Nigeria: Erosion of Cultural Values or Capitalism?

By Uche Uwaezuoke Okonkwo¹ and Ngozi Anthonia Obi-Ani²

Abstract

The erection and proliferation of baby factories constitute one of the major injustices directed at women especially teenage girls in southeastern Nigeria. Under this arrangement, women are incarcerated for the purpose of procreation alone. A litany of scholarly works has been written on this subject, placing the blame for this impunity, in Nigeria on the capitalist system. This paper insists that beyond capitalism, there is a need to interrogate the cultural erosion of values mostly responsible for this scourge. To achieve this, newspapers, interviews, archival materials and other extant secondary sources have been used for data collection, analysis and for the interpretation of results. The paper employs the qualitative method of analysis.

Keywords: Baby factories, cultural erosion, capitalism, women, teenage girls, Nigerian women, Nigeria

Introduction

A baby factory is an arrangement whereby unmarried pregnant teenagers are confined to a particular location until they deliver their babies. Upon delivery, teenage mothers are paid tokens and are discharged while their babies are taken from them and sold at exorbitant prices by the proprietor (Obioma et al, 2015:66-67). This phenomenon has grown significantly from the social perception of conceiving without getting married especially as it concerns many teenage girls in southeastern Nigeria, particularly those belonging to the Igbo speaking ethnic group, which will be the central focus of this paper. The region consists of several states such as Imo, Anambra, Enugu, Abia, and Ebonyi. On a larger scale, the baby factory phenomenon involves the trading of mostly women for the purposes of forced labor, sexual slavery or commercial sex exploitation.

The rising cases of baby factories have been so alarming that available records indicate that in the year 2014, there were about 2,500 teenage girls rescued by the police in southeastern Nigeria (Obioma et al, 2015:66-67). In a detailed study, Huntley (2013) has shown that most teenage girls were brought to baby factories with false promises of jobs or safe abortions. According to her, they are confined and forced to give birth and in most cases are trafficked while still pregnant. In more

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alarming cases, they are delivered of their babies, are given tokens, are told to nurse their babies and are impregnated again, repeating a vicious cycle of exploitation.

In lieu of this, 'Baby Factories' can be equated with Portuguese, Arab or American slave plantations where people were kept in perpetual servitudes during the slave trade era. This is because the whole gamut of slavery is hinged on labor, which in the case of baby factories, is reproductive labor. In December 2013, following the arrest of Dr. James Ezuma, the owner of Ezuma Women and Children Rights Protection Initiative, the upsurge of baby factory owners in southeastern Nigeria was made open. According to the report, Ezuma worked with many collaborators whose jobs involved bringing pregnant unmarried girls with the claim of providing antenatal and postnatal services for them. Upon the delivery of their babies, they were given money ranging from N50,000 to about N200,000 and their babies were taken away from them (Bankong-Obi, 2014:16). A former Commissioner of Police in Imo State, Nigeria who investigated the case of Ezuma reveals that the practice is conducted in such a manner that teenage girls are misinformed by a group of syndicates known as 'hunters' which according to him are gifted with sugar-coated words/mouths. Appropriating the vulnerability of the teenage girls, they are converted to baby manufacturing machines (Katsina, 2014:18). With 46% of the Nigerian populace living below poverty lines, baby factory owners seize such an opportunity to perpetuate their deeds (Makinde et al, 2017:100).

The teenage girls in the baby factories during the period and process of giving birth are exposed to methods of harvesting babies debased of ethical gynecological practice; as they are subjected to induced labor and other crude methods of delivery (Katsina, 2014:16). Still on the path of interrogating hostile environments in baby factories, a discovery made by the Police at Ahamaefula Babies Home at Umuaka in Njaba Local Government of Imo State, owned by one "Madam one thousand", reveals that teenage girls were kept in very indecent apartments with high perimeter fences that had broken bottles around the top. They were never allowed to go out and were placed in gruesome situations where they received brutal rounds of sex so that they could produce more babies. At the point of the investigation by the police in 2014, twenty-seven teenage girls were found pregnant (Katsina, 2014:19).

Baby factories in southeastern Nigeria are patronized mostly by barren couples, voodooists and cross border traffickers (Agu, 2014:26). This patronage partly explains the affluence of most baby factory owners. For instance, Dr. Ezuma at the point of his arrest in 2013 had several structural projects worth millions of naira nearing completion and fleets of cars such as the Jaguar, two Chrysler cars, a Lincoln Navigator, a Honda jeep, a Nissan Quest, a Pathfinder Sport Utility Vehicle and three other vehicles (Bankong-Obi, 2014:16). This affluence is informed by the lucrative nature of this business as babies are sold between N900,000 to N1million. It was also being operated like poultry business since children could be bought and resold at a startling amount of five million naira depending on the sex of the baby desired by the buyer (Katsina, 2014:21). The societal preference for male children made them even more expensive in the "Baby Factory" business.

It was reported in August 2019 that some of the orphanages that operated in Asaba, Okpanam, Warri, Ughelli and Sapele depended on the sale of motherless babies for their survival. Available evidences indicate that three months to one-year-old babies were allegedly sold between N50,000 and N60,000 while toddlers of two years and above were selectively handpicked by the highest bidder at costs between N200,000 to N600,000 (Akenzua, 2019:4). There was also another pathetic story of Nma Charity Home at Umumkpee village Isiala Ngwa owned by Mrs. Nma Achuma where girls engaged in selling their babies at N300,000 to N350,000. This was the case

of Blessing Sunday of Okwe-Owerre Umueze of Ehime Mbano of Imo State who brought the operation of Nma Charity home to public attention. After giving birth through caesarian section, she was left bleeding and this aroused the anger of the youths in the area (Duruiheoma,2019:35) At this juncture, it becomes important to state that the need to examine the 'Get money quick syndrome' in Nigeria is imperative in this research. As such, there is a need to interrogate the cultural dimension of the emergence of baby factories, of marriage, of childlessness, of adoption and finally of security agents and the law. A close examination of some of these sub-aspects will help to address if cultural erosion or the quest for wealth is responsible for the growth and sustenance of baby factories in southeastern Nigeria.

Cultural Dimension to the Emergence of Baby Factories

The history of child trafficking and kidnapping has been in existence among the Igbo-speaking people since precolonial times. A historical excursion to this claim will help illuminate our understanding. Our first point of reference is Olaudah Equiano, an Igbo ex-slave, who was stolen from his village of Isseke around the year of 1754. He later bought his freedom and wrote his *Interesting Narrative* in 1789(Edwards, 1996).

Another reference point to this age-long menace of child trafficking activities in southeastern Nigeria was captured by Pita Nwana in his book *Omenuko*. Omenuko, as recorded by Pita Nwana, sold his apprentices in the early 20th century due to the temporary setback he suffered in his business (Nwana, 1963). The two unique examples illustrated above were associated with the slave trade. Notwithstanding the antiquity of child trafficking among the Igbo, it was not an acceptable norm for child adoption or for the sustenance of family lineage. The Igbo society from the outset had its own yardstick of solving problems surrounding childlessness and infertility. The case of infertility and childlessness among the Igbo was resolved through a method of culturally permissible adultery, by the woman, in cases where the man was impotent. In other situations, the woman helped to find a suitable co-wife for her husband. To support this view, Basden records how Igbo couples resolved the issue of infertility as follows:

If in due course, no children are forthcoming as a result of the union, serious differences arise between husband and wife, each mutually accusing the other of being responsible for this state of affair. Should matters continue so, the wife is at liberty to cohabit with another man in order, if possible, to secure the desired result. Should any children be born in this way, they are recognized as the property of the husband, just as if he were the actual father (Basden, 2006:64)

In addendum to the point raised above, Ifemesia has this to say:

If later, in the course of wedlock, it was unfortunately discovered that the wife was sterile or the husband was impotent, or any other physiological complications arose, strains and stresses could develop in the marriage; but generally, the problem was contained as much as possible within the family. In the case of the woman, after a respectable period had elapsed since the marriage began; the man might take a second wife. Sometimes it was the first wife herself who took the initiative in procuring a second wife for her husband, in accordance with the people's humane view of life, the family must not lack human beings. As for the man, in intractable

situations, his impotence could eventually lead to divorce. But quite often, arrangements would be made by his parents (or, in their absence, by other responsible members of the lineage) to provide the woman with a robust, reliable and reputable friend outside her own husband patrilineages. And reliable and the whole affair would be conducted with much decency and privacy that the man's self-esteem was carefully preserved. Any children issuing from such proceedings, of course, belong to the family and did not any local or legal disabilities (Ifemesia, 1979:61).

The above assertions depict, in the main, how precolonial Igbo society devised its own method of addressing infertility and childlessness. Unfortunately, society has evolved in an entirely different dimension that childlessness is no longer handled in the traditional way. This is obvious with the emergence of baby factories in Nigeria, which according to UNESCO records in 2006, may not be disconnected to the cultural definition of child ownership along biological or hereditary lines (Editorial, 2016:4).

To this end, the claim that the rush to make quick money may have lured people into the "baby factory" business may not be entirely false. However, the Igbo society has a way of distinguishing between the wealthy (Ogaranya) and the noble (Dimkpa). Indeed, the societal measurement of values may have derailed but the greatest obstacle militating against the incessant child theft and the operation of the baby factory is the cultural erosion of values. To fully explore this, there is the need to revisit the contemporary measurement of Igbo values. A popular Igbo saying has it that *Aku ruo ulo okwu ebe osiri bia* (When wealth gets home, it will say where it came from). While kidnapers, fraudsters and other categories of ill-gotten wealth may have considerable influences on contemporary Igbo society due to hunger in the land, their influences do not last long. The Otokoto uprising in Owerri in the year 1996 is a reference point. The masses rose in protest of a boy, Ikechukwu Okonkwo, who was beheaded by the alleged ritual class in Owerri. The destruction of properties owned by the rich in Owerri became a deterrent for all those in that category who eventually fled the town (Odomene, 2011:335).

Again, it has been argued that the cultural set up of the Igbo people was altered after their civil war experiences (Isichei, 1979:253, Obi-Ani 2017:205). Many vices that were hitherto unknown became rife. An informant lamented that, "before the war, we don't know what theft is, armed robbery but pilferers and not stealing with guns." He further opined that most Igbo cultural values were dropped and desecrated (Chief Itanyi, personal communication; 2016). This further confirmed the opinion of Brown Enyi who mentioned that, "What was in existence was simply robbery of which weapons included knives, machetes, bows, arrows and clubs. In short, robbery incidents were few and isolated and therefore did not constitute a problem requiring special intervention measures as was with the case in post-war Igboland" (Odoh,1999:88). The war brought robbery to an unprecedented level never witnessed before. This was because cessation of hostility saw many ex-Biafran soldiers throw away their guns. They were not properly demobilized. These guns were later recovered in the forests and sold out to people after the war (Odoh,1999:88). This accounts for the beginning of the proliferation of small arms in Igboland. Stealing and armed robbery destroyed family cohesion as families stole from one another to survive especially land and cash crops which generated strife and quarrels among kinsmen. To win these wars, some resorted to voodoo to eliminate established and potential rivals. As Isichei aptly observes, "Sensitive observers sometimes detect a change in the caliber of Igbo life: A greater materialism, a greater cynicism, a greater hedonism" (Isichei,1979:253). As the Igbo were not

adequately rehabilitated after the war by the victorious federal government, devious people engaged in nefarious activities and their economic subjugation induced a feverish hunger for materialism. Thus, the baby factory business found a home there.

Marriage, Childlessness and Adoption

The outcomes of successful marriages in southeastern Nigeria are measured by the number of children born into a particular marriage. Among the Igbo, daughters could stay at home and give birth in their father's house in order to sustain the family lineage. This is referred to as *Idegbe*, a system whereby a daughter can stay back without getting married to conceive and bear children that will answer her father's name in situations where her own father does not have a male child.

Another way of checkmating childlessness in a marriage can be found in female-to-female marriage (Amadiume, 1987:). Under this arrangement, a woman can marry a fellow woman as a wife and allow her to mingle with men of her choice for the purpose of procreation. Some of the aforementioned practices are gradually fading away. Many external factors such as Christianity and Western education have also affected people's ideas and concepts of family. As Ojedokun and Atoi (2016) record, childless couples are mostly ridiculed and stigmatized by their husbands' extended families and members of their immediate communities. To avoid the stigma of childlessness, many couples go the extra mile to purchase babies.

Still on family considerations, as a factor responsible for the patronage of 'baby factories,' unmarried young girls who through premarital sex got pregnant explore the option of the baby factory as a way to tackle the shame they bring to their respective families (Owolabi,2017:269). As a result of this development, orphanages no longer have enough babies for adoption and the pregnant teenage girls explore the option of economic gains by selling off their own babies (Obioma et al,2015:68). Tactics adopted by women seeking to buy babies from baby factories have been revealed. Some fake their pregnancies by consuming drugs that will protrude their stomachs after which they will buy newly born babies to cover up their heinous deeds and justify that they are the biological owners of these children (Obioma et al, 2015).

In recent times, another method called cryptic pregnancy has emerged. The owners of cryptic pregnancy centers give drugs to childless couples and instruct them to have intercourse consistently for a month. As months pass by, the women gain weight especially around the waist to the hip areas. This particular pregnancy cannot be detected by any scanning machine. The baby and its growth are monitored by the person who administered the drug. Women questioned about this phenomenon claim that the baby stays outside the womb while their buttocks increase instead. Some of these women carry their baby/babies for a year or more. For couples who are not financially buoyant, the woman can carry the baby until the entire payment ranging from a million plus (1-1.2 million naira per baby to 2 million naira for twins, equivalent of \$2,759-\$5,518) is paid. This is because the birth of such babies is exorbitant especially twins (personal observation and interactions of the authors). In order to give legitimacy that they actually gave birth naturally without stomach protrusion, these women claim that they give birth to their babies in the presence of a relative; however, the whole hog seems like the more you look, the less you see. The grey area in the entire birth factor is that none of those women have been able to breastfeed their babies. The illusion is that they "naturally" gave birth but cannot naturally produce breast milk.

A quick look at what is cryptic pregnancy reveals that, "a cryptic pregnancy, also called a stealth pregnancy, is a pregnancy that conventional medical testing methods may fail to detect" (Watson,2019). Cryptic pregnancies are not common, but they are not unheard of either. Medical

evidence suggests that women might not be aware of their pregnancies in up to 1 out of 475 cases (Watson,2019). If such pregnancies are a rarity, one wonders about the preponderance of this among many women in the former southeastern part of Nigeria. Some writers believe that since owners of the baby factory are nabbed daily by security agents, these dubious businessmen and women have devised a new method of deceiving the government as well as desperate couples. It has been argued among women, whom the writers have interacted with, that the administrators of the “cryptic” pregnancy drugs also engage in baby factory business. The desperate couples with their money will be in wait until any of these teenage pregnant girls are due; after which they will secure the newborn child and come home to claim that the buyer naturally gave birth. These births are done in certain designated cities like Port Harcourt, Aba, and in recent times, Enugu.

However, the economic dimension of the “Baby Factory” business is that forces of capitalism driven by the logic of demand and supply play a significant role in providing both the babies and the buyers (Okoli,2014:81). In addition to the issue of cultural erosion of values, there are other issues to be considered. The Igbo as a people oppose any form of child ownership outside the natural form of conception and delivery and various Igbo idioms seem to justify this belief. For example, *uzu akpu nwa* – A blacksmith cannot create a child, *Chinenyenwa*-God gives children or *Nwa bu onyinye Chukwu*-Children are gifts from God (Ele, 2016:15, Ifemesia, 1979:61).

Thus, among the several cases leading to the emergence of the baby factory business is infertility. A report from Dr. Odidika Umeora, the Head of Obstetrics and Gynecology, at the Federal Teaching Hospital Abakaliki has this to say:

This last year (2013), we got 493. Apart from the four months strike and other breaks, last year, I do not think, as a department, we saw less than 500 cases of infertility. Just 500 is on the low side. There is no day I go to the clinic that I don't have a minimum of four, five or six cases of infertility. So, if you take four and we run five clinics per week that is 20 cases. You are talking about 80 in a month. And that is more than 1,000 in a year, I think that is more like it (Umeora, 2014:27)

In any case, this is worrisome as many married couples in southeastern Nigeria have fertility problems and as such, are incapable of bearing their own biological children. A specialist at the Federal Medical Centre Umuahia reveals that since smoking is rampant and with the increase in chronic alcoholism, potential threats to infertility are on the rise. His advice is that women should avoid a lifestyle that can lead to glymetia and gonorrhoea, diseases that are capable of causing a tubal blockage (Agu, 2014:25).

During the colonial period, people from the old Eastern Nigeria, who had the issue of childlessness opted for adoption. Available records from the National Calabar Archives are replete with such cases. For example, on 6 November 1917, Charles E. Johnson of Beecroft Street Calabar allowed her daughter (with her consent) to be adopted by Mrs. Sarah Kinson. Mr. Effiong Efiom and Asa Mbe (the wife) allowed Mrs. Christiana R. Moses to adopt their daughter Harriet Effiong and Mr. J. Otobo together with his wife Jennie allowed their daughter Mary Otobo to be adopted by Mrs. Sarah Kinson. The conditions are that those who intend to adopt children should be able to educate, cloth, feed and shelter their adopted children and would always allow their biological parents to see them from time to time (National Archives Calabar, NAC, CADIST 3/1/34). The case of adoption in southeastern Nigeria is perceived with misgivings by many who feel it is culturally abominable and generally an aberration (Obioma et al, 2015:64). The aforementioned factor is responsible for the persistent patronage to the owners of “Baby Factories.”

Baby Factories, Security Agents and the Law

The case of “Baby Factories” in Nigeria suggests that the claim that corruption is visible in every nook and cranny of the Nigerian State may not be spurious as there appears to be a duplication of functions amongst various Nigerian security agents such as the Police Force, the Nigerian Security and Civil Defence Corps (NSCDC), the National Agency for the Prohibition in Trafficking Persons (NAPTIP) and the Department of State Security (DSS).

The National Assembly in 2003 enacted the Act of Child Rights with the backing of agencies such as the Federal Ministry of Women Affairs, the Federal Ministry of Labour, Employment and Productivity and the National Agency for Prohibition of Traffic in Persons placed in charge (Owolabi, 2017:271). These were established by the Federal Government of Nigeria to coordinate the laws on trafficking of persons and other related offenses in order to enhance the effectiveness of the law enforcement agents that suppress the trafficking of people.

There is exactly nothing wrong with having a joint task force to prosecute child and human trafficking; however, there is everything wrong with its *modus operandi* especially the legal framework that tackles this menace. According to the conditions of service of the NSCDC, as of July 2007 chapter six, the functions of NSCDS include:

‘They are empowered to arrest, gather intelligence, information and investigate criminal and civil cases before handing over to the police’ (NSCDS, Conditions of Service, 2007:65)

The point is that although they are empowered by law to investigate, they are not allowed to prosecute. Available records also show that the National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons (NAPTIP) has incurred public angst over leniency with child traffickers such as Dr. James Ezuma and Hyacinth Orikara who were arrested and were later released to continue their trade (FG Needs to Curb the Menace,2014:28). Similarly, the owner of the Uzoma Maternity Clinic in Enugu was arrested on two occasions in 2006 and 2008 but was later granted bail with the case adjourned indefinitely (Nwaka and Odomene,2019:7). More so, there are too many cases of rivalries between security agents over the fate of cases of child theft and purchase in baby factories.

Scholars have called for the improvement of the NAPTIP Act, especially the legal framework and logistics that handle offenders (Alfred et al, 2014 & Owolabi, 2017). The continuous wastage of money in many government ministries such as in the Ministry of Labor and in the Ministry of Women Affairs requires policy restructuring; as the Women Affairs Ministry appears to be a jamboree considering the caliber of persons occupying executive powers in Nigeria. Furthermore, there is little or no meaningful commitment as regards the address of the plights of women and children. Thus, the ministry has continued to grow as an annex of the ruling political party in power. As such, for the baby factory syndrome to be curtailed, many hands need to be on the deck.

Table of Cases of Baby Factories in Nigeria 2003-2015

1999-2003	140 cases of baby dumping in southeastern Nigeria.
2004	A Baby Factory at Zik Avenue Enugu discovered.
2006-2008	84 Cases of abandoned babies
May 2008	Police rescued 25 teenage girls in a baby factory in Aba.
2008	Police discovered Baby factory operating as orphanage in Enugu.
In March 2009	42 pregnant girls discovered in a baby factory in Isiala Ngwa.
In June 2011	Police freed 32 teenage girls from baby factory in Aba.
October 2011	17 pregnant girls were saved from an orphanage in Lagos.
18 May 2013	A Midwife was caught in Port Harcourt in Rivers State for collecting N4.2Million for miracles.
19 May 2013	17 pregnant girls were rescued from fake motherless babies' home in Orlu.
24 May 2013	A 23-year-old pregnant woman and her husband were arrested in Lagos for selling their neighbor's son for the price of N400,000.
May 2013	Police saved 6 teenage girls from a baby Factory in Enugu.
June 2013	Police freed 16 young women from a clinic in Aba.
July 2013	Police arrested the owner of Moonlight Maternity Home in Aba for selling babies from unwanted pregnancies.
August &Sept 2013	Police unveiled two cases of baby boom business in Imo State.
2014	71 victims were found in baby factories in Aba, Akwa Ibom, Anambra, Delta, Enugu, Imo, Ogun, Ondo, and Rivers State.
2015	Founder of One Game NGO reported that an average of 10 children are being sold daily in southeastern Nigeria.
March 2017	Child traffickers caught in Owerri.

July 2017	Baby factory with pregnant women and boys discovered in Owerri.
January 2019	Teenage prostitution center discovered in World Bank Housing Estate in Owerri, Southeastern Nigeria.
March 2019	Missing girl (15) years recovered from Baby Factory in Owerri.

Source: Compiled by the authors from Newspapers, Magazines, and Online publications

Conclusion

Lending a voice to the voiceless is one way for social history to interpret events as registered in the above table. The history of empires and kingdoms has been written but the history of the poor, the oppressed and the less privileged have been relegated to the background; thus, deserves scholarly attention. In addition to expanding the frontiers of knowledge, this paper draws the attention of policy makers and political stakeholders to the need to map out programs that will help alleviate the sufferings of women and teenage girls who pass through many ordeals because of poverty, unwanted pregnancy and human erosion of societal values. Hence, there is a need to intensify the agitation against human trafficking in Nigeria. Apart from a bleak future, teenage girls are exposed to the psychological trauma of sexual exploitation. Therefore, parents are encouraged to be aware of who they give their female daughters to.

Furthermore, government agencies such as the Independent Corrupt Practices Commission (ICPC) must rise to scrutinize budgets and expenditure in the Ministry of Women Affairs, especially funds constantly made available to improve the living conditions of women. Finally, there is a total collapse of the value system and the cultural shack; hence all manners of accepted norms have filtered in. To rectify this aberration, moral education must be restored in schools and religious bodies. Families also must re-echo the moral campaign. Most importantly, sex education must be included as part of the pedagogic outline in Nigerian post-primary schools.

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