MODERN SLAVERY: WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO CHILDLABOUR AND WIDOWHOOD IN NIGERIA

A
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AT THE

FEDERATION OF INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS MUSEUMS (FIHRM) SECOND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE IN LIVERPOOL
10TH – 13TH OCTOBER, 2011.

THEME:
FIGHTING FOR EQUALITY;
SOCIAL CHANGE THROUGH HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISM

SUB THEME:
MODERN SLAVERY.
INTRODUCTION:

Slavery according to the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, is simply; “the state of being legally owned by another person and is forced to work for them”.

**Slavery in Africa in the Past.**

In the past, in the whole world, there existed different kinds of slavery; the most lucrative being human slavery. This form of slavery (human) led most parts of the Western world to Africa, where human beings were shipped as merchandise to rich farmers who used them as hands, on their farms and house holds.

But today, despite the abolition of slavery world wide, there still exist different forms of slavery, which are caused by many factors, where these factors exist minimally in some parts of the world, they are prevalent in some others, especially in Africa and other developing countries, with about 60% engaged in agriculture.
The slave trade in Africa, which was officially banned in the early 1880s meant to stop all kinds of slavery, but forced labour and other types of modern slavery continue to be practiced in West and Central Africa today. UNICEF stipulates that 200,000 children from West and Central Africa are sold into slavery each year. It has been observed that modern day slaves exist in different countries, as servants or concubines in Sudan, as carpet slaves in India or as cane-cutters in Haiti and Southern Pakistan. **According to Anti-slavery International**, there are currently over 20 million people in bondage. The enslavement of the Dinkas in Southern Sudan may be the most horrific and well-known example of contemporary slavery. In 1993 State Departments estimated that up to 90,000 blacks are owned by North African Arabs, and often sold as property in a thriving slave trade for as little as $15 per human being.

Animist tribes in South Sudan are frequently invaded by Arab tribes militias from the North, who kill the men and enslave the women and children. Another bad case exists in India where children are kidnapped from their village when they are young and are held captive in locked rooms and forced to weave in 100ms for food.

The International Labour Rights and Education Fund which has rescued many of these child slaves recalls this scene: “Children work in damp pits near the loom. Potable water is often unavailable and food consists of a few chapattis (bread balls), onions and salt.....The children often are made to sleep on the ground next to their looms, or in nearby sheds. After working from ten to fourteen hours, they are expected to clean out their shade and set up work for the next day”.
Modern day slavery has become a cankerworm eating deep in different societies all over the world. Even in the developed world, some form of modern slavery exists. Joanna Ewart – Jane coordinator of Anti slavery’s supply chain project who looked into recent discovery of forced labour in English country side wrote in July 2008, that the arrest of nine people has revealed that a criminal gang is being “…accused of trafficking the workers to the United Kingdom from several Eastern European countries, before forcing them to work up to 16 hours a day, picking vegetables”.

Young girls are being taken from Africa to live with fellow blacks in the United Kingdom and other parts of the world as house helps, while some are taken into prostitution where their wages are handed over to their masters/mistresses who on arrival would have seized their passports, leaving them with no option than to accept any treatment or condition meted out to them. In some cases in Africa, young girls are given out to early marriages, to help relieve their families from poverty or indebtedness. These early marriages lead to several complications later in life. Some either die in the process of child birth, due to immaturity of the pelvic, or develop some terminal diseases.

In 2008 there were 215 million children working illegally. In the eyes of international law, almost 14% of all the world’s children under 18 are working. In sub-Saharan Africa, this proportion rises to 25%. The global total includes 115 million children under 18 engaged in “hazardous work” which could threaten their safety or health, such as handling chemicals, carrying heavy loads, mining, quarrying and enduring long hours.

The most horrifying aspect of child labour is prostitution, military enrolment in war-torn countries, slavery etc which removes the child from his home, often involving deception and payment for a whole range of exploitative purposes.
DIFFERENT ASPECTS OF MODERN SLAVERY IN NIGERIA

Although different aspects of modern slavery exist in Nigeria, little of no attention is paid to help stop it. This is because the powers that be are either directly involved or benefit in one way or the other.

Even when much noise is being made by some Human Rights Organizations and most recently some None Governmental Organizations (NGOs); little is actually being implemented by way of active move to stop it. For instant, the Child’s Right Act was passed into law in 2003 and adopted by 23 states including the Federal Capital Territory (FCT) this act was passed to help curb modern slavery as it affects the child. E.g. Child Labour, Child Abuse, Street begging, early marriage of the girl child etc, and in spite of the above, modern slavery as it affects the child still strives in Nigeria. Let us pause a while and look critically at **Child Labour in Nigeria**
WHO IS A CHILD?
The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary defines “a child as a young human who is not yet an adult”.
The Child’s Right Act of 2003 defines a child as a person under the age of eighteen years. (CYPA) defines a child as young persons under the age of fourteen years.

The Meaning of Child Labour

This term generally means work carried out by children which is harmful to their development. The issue in child labour is not whether the child is paid for the work done, or not, it is the fact that he/she is not yet ripe for such work. In this case the child is exploited, over used and humiliated.

In Nigeria Tradition, children were known to work with their parents. In the past, children go to the farm with their parents either carrying little baskets or even empty handed. The aim, being to introduce them early in life on how to survive as adults. Parents introduced their children to family trades, crafts etc.

But the trend has shifted to children being forced to work in order to find food for themselves and the family as a whole. 2005, UNICEF reported that 15million children under the age of 14 work across Nigeria. These children who are exposed to long hours of work hardly find time to rest or even eat adequately. They are made to bear burdens too much for their age.

Statistics shows that these children are mainly engaged in public places, street vendors 64% beggars 13%, shoe shiners 4% car washers/watchers 6% scavengers 5% and feet washers 8% and in semi process as apprentice mechanics/vulcanizers 24%, bus conductors, 17%, iron/metal workers 6%, carpenters 14%, tailors/weaves 14%, hair dressers/barbers 18% and caterers 8%.
Factors Responsible for Child Labour

Poverty is the major factor responsible for child labour. And this could be caused by death of a parent (who could have been the bread winner), large family size and most recently bad economic situation in the country.

When the breadwinner of a family dies or leaves by way of divorce or separation, the child is left with no option than to take to the streets to fend for himself and his/her younger ones.

This also happens when a couple has more children than they can cater for. In most cases, it is either that the child takes to hawking, begging, and prostitution etc. or is given out to richer families to serve as house helps.

In most cases such children are enslaved from childhood to adulthood. They are treated like secondhand citizens. The child is forced into exploitation labour. In this situation the child is made to believe that he has to work in order to help reduce the family’s economic burden.

Another factor responsible for child labour in Nigeria is rural urban migration. Because there is no infrastructural development in the rural areas, families are seen migrating to the cities to seek for better life. But in most cases such families may not be well equipped with good education and skills to cope with urban life. Thus subjecting them to menial jobs which earning may not be adequate to take care of their children. In such cases, you see the children taking to street trading, hawking, begging and even in some extreme cases, prostitution in order to help enhance the family economy.
On September 10, 2011 one of the leading Newspapers in Nigeria, the Saturday Punch, featured the gory story of an eight year old girl, Endurance Favour Obilor, who is a victim of both child labour and child abuse.

In the writer's words, the girl “is traumatized, scared and looks hungry. She’s been abused, beaten and raped”. Favour is a [product of a broken marriage. She was taken by her aunty (father’s sister) and instead of taking care of her, she handed her over to her friend, who in turn gave her out to a woman who brutalized her, and subjected her to slavery. The matter has been taken to the Lagos State Chapter of Human Rights Commission, who has promised to take it up and persecute whoever is involved. This is just one out of so many such cases in Nigeria. It is obvious that somebody was collecting money on behalf of that girl.

In Nigeria so many people, especially women, do business with children of the poor and orphans whom they give out to rich families to serve as housemaids. Once you come to such families you don’t need to be told who the ‘slave’ in the house is. This is as a result of appearance (always clothed in tattered, oversized clothes). They do not eat when the children in the house are eating. In some extreme cases, they are not allowed to eat the same food cooked for other members of the family.
WIDOWHOOD IN NIGERIA

The Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary defines a widow as, “… a woman whose husband has died and who has not remarried”. And widowhood as, “the state or period of being a widow or widower.

Abraham (1997), defined widowhood as the state of mourning the loss of one’s husband or wife through death. Gbenda (1997) in his own opinion believes that widowhood is an issue that affects more women than men. He also noted that evidence indicates that over the long term women are affected more severely than men, financially, psychologically, sexually, and socially.

All the definitions above are saying almost the same thing.

In my own opinion, I have just one world for widowhood in Nigeria, ‘slavery’.

Widowhood has become a thing of concern in Nigerian Society. A woman does not just feel the burden and sorrow of losing her husband, but is laddened with the problem of brothers and sisters in-law who enslave her by either forcing her to release the late husband’s assets or in most cases marry one of her late husband’s brothers, amounting to the enslavement of the widow and her children. And the refusal to do that opens up so many accusations that are always too much for the widow to bear.
Widowhood in Nigeria is a sordid situation which merely allocates scorn, disdain and permanent membership of the wretched of the earth. Babangida (1988). In the Eastern Part of Nigeria, in particular, any woman that loses her husband needs to be cleansed because it is believed that she has been contaminated. In order to be cleansed of this ‘dirt’ for normal interaction with members of the society, a number of mourning rites/traditions are prescribed: such as wailing profusely immediately after the death of her husband, the widow is also kept with the corpse of her husband before burial to keep away flies from the body, waking the household with her wailing, which is measured as adequate or otherwise by the female relatives of her dead husband (Umuada) among others. Oniye (2000).

In almost all parts of Nigeria, confinement is compulsory for a widow. And in some places little, poorly cooked food is served the widow in either broken clay plates or even worse items. Generally, two-three weeks is the duration for employed widows while unemployed widows are expected to use forty days to be confined to mourning.

In most cases, to disinherit a woman and her children of the dead man’s property, some in-laws would accuse the widow of having a hand in her husband’s death. In such case in order to vindicate herself, the widow is expected to drink the water used for bathing the corpse of her late husband. If she does this successfully, she may be vindicated. In some extreme cases, the in-laws always find a way of poisoning the widow, blaming her death on guilt, thereby subjecting the orphans to untold hardship and enslavement. The unfortunate thing about this situation is that nobody questions the in-laws. The villagers always believe that the owners of the corpse have the right to take any decision they want.

During the celebration of the 3rd Annual “Day of Action” organized by International Human Rights Law Group and Women’s Aid Collective in 2001, many widows had the opportunity to share their gruesome experiences with all present. Among the issues that came up are:

*Manipulation of the Custom to justify Disinheritance.*

*Poverty.*

*Violence against widows*
Manipulation of Custom to Justify Disinheritance

At the gathering several women expressed their surprise at some of their educated in-laws who hitherto did not believe in Traditional and Customary ways of doing things riverting in order to disinherit the widows and their children of the dead man’s property, including land and houses which the couple must have built together and lived in for a long time. Thereby throwing the widow and children into the street without anything to live on.

It is worthy of note that customary law does not state that women should be thrown out of their home or off their land upon their husbands’ death. Traditionally, if a man dies it is the duty of his brothers to take care of the deceased family but greed and lust have often driven the next of kin to want to marry the brother’s wife in order to possess his property. This situation occurs mainly if the deceased was rich, and had left a lot. In the case of Mrs. Helen Eze whom I had the privilege of interviewing, her husband was a very rich merchant but was killed by armed robbers, leaving her with six children. The last two were twins and were barely one year old when their bread winner died.

Because her husband was rich and the brothers wanted to take over his limited liability company, they accused Helen of killing her husband. She was pressurized to take an oath by drinking a concoction believed to be poison, which she refused. She was arrested by the police for Homicide and was detained with her tender twins for four months. She narrated that while she was there her in-laws wrote to the bank and seized the bank account and all the company assets.

After police investigation, she was released on the basis that, “The allegations were unfounded and therefore baseless”. She went on, “As if that was not enough, they persecuted me, writing to the Federal High Court, Lagos. Their goal was to take everything that was meant for the family”. The matter dragged for fourteen months during which the in-laws refused the burial of the deceased. She showed me some documents to buttress her claims.
Poverty

What most people do not understand is the depth of poverty into which most widows and their children are plunged into at the occasion of the death of their breadwinner, especially when their rights are denied them. Many African women become destitutes upon the death of their husband.

Mrs. Ramatou, a widow stated that when her husband died, she was forced to move from house to house, taking shelter with anyone who would offer it to her and her children. Mrs. Chukwuokpo and her eight children were thrown out from the land she used to farm with her husband. In her own words, she said, “I couldn’t believe that the relatives of my deceased husband would be so instrumental in denying me the only source of food and sustenance for my eight children”.

Mrs. Ilo, who is childless is widowed over 30 years. She had a very good and promising life, because of the palm trees she had access to which automatically became hers by marriage. After her husband’s death, she was forced to return to her father’s compound. Ever since, she has lived in extreme poverty.
Violence Against Widow

Not only that widows in most parts of Nigeria suffer extreme poverty, some go through untold physical and psychological violence in the hands of the in-laws.

Most common and painful are the “widowhood rites”. Often times, at the death of a man, the widow is either taken to the back of the house or bank of a river to shave her hair. In some extreme cases, she is forced to sleep with her husband’s corpse and is isolated from other members of the community.
WHAT CAN MUSEUMS DO TO HELP IN THE FIGHT AGAINST MODERN SLAVERY?

At this point, I think it is apt for us to look at what the museums can do or how far they can go in working towards ending slavery today.

The museum as we can see has all it takes to fight modern slavery. The museum in Nigeria is waking up to the task of working with the public in order to make life better for everybody, especially the underprivileged.

The museum in Lagos, in particular, is a general museum which caters for different public in Lagos and neighbouring state like Ogun State. It is one of the biggest and busiest museums in Nigeria. The museum in Lagos is situated in the heart of the city called Onikan. Onikan is very close to the Famous Race Course where the Colonial masters used for their popular Horse Races.

This museum enjoys the patronage of varieties of visitors, which the greater percentage are school children. This puts the Lagos museum in the right position to reach out to as many members of the public as possible. This makes the education unit of this museum the busiest and most productive in the country. The museum in Lagos has the potentials to fight modern slavery because it conducts series of lectures for adults and programmes for school children of different levels and ages. In several of the school programmes, children are exposed to activities that task their brains on serious issues eg. debates and essay competition, drama, as well as those that humor their tender nature like cultural activities, eg. Cultural dances, Traditional Fashion Parade, etc. Such programmes designed for children could bring out the ills of modern slavery, thereby creating awareness and possible solutions. It will create opportunity for the children to have a say in the matter.
The education unit in the Lagos museum has started a new teaching programme for secondary school children who come in batches 2 to 3 times in the week for special lectures on cultural topics that appear in their curriculum. In this class, power-point is used to illustrate whatever topic being taught. Lessons on the ills of Modern Slavery could be incorporated in such classes.

This will go a long way to ending child labour and child abuse, as most of these children either join their parents in exploiting fellow children or are victims themselves.

If the actor and the acted upon are aware of the evils, then the first steps to ending it would have been taken. Involving children in the campaign for ending modern slavery, I believe is the most effective of all efforts to ending of it.

Right now, apart from the activities in the museum, involving school children directly, the education unit in Lagos is also collaborating with some organizations that work with children to drive this point home. Series of programmes are being planned to start this campaign. One will be coming up this November/December. It is a debate among some selected schools in the Lagos Metropolis on “HOUSE HELP IS A NECESSARY EVIL”. The students are expected to speak in support or against the practice, thereby bringing out all the ills that are associated with this practice. This will be done in collaboration with Inspire Kids” and many companies that produce children’s products have been contacted to sponsor the programme.
I have also started discussion with some Human Rights groups who are involved in widowhood practices in Nigeria. We are talking about organizing as many programmes as possible next year, depending on the sponsorship we can get. These programmes would be geared towards enlightening widows and other women on their rights.

We also plan to involve men so that they would make adequate legal arrangement for their families, in the case of their death. Rev. (Dr.) Levi Adegbe in his interview with *Sunday Punch Newspaper* agrees that men should plan for their families before death. He observed that Nigeria men do not make plans for their wives and children. No life insurance, no wills, no special savings for children’s education.

He advised that Nigeria married men should begin to make plans for their families as soon as they get married, state clearly what they would want their wealth to be done with when they die.
CONCLUSION

With the plan on ground to beef up campaigns on human rights issues by museums, there is hope that some of those aspects of modern slavery could be either curbed or completely eradicated with time.

THANK YOU FOR LISTENING.