

Original Research Article

STREET HAWKING AMONG CHILDREN: A FORM OF CHILD ABUSE OFTEN OVERLOOKED

ABSTRACT

Background: Despite efforts by the government to ensure that child labour is eradicated, children are still exposed to the menace of this abuse and other forms of abuse. This paper examined street hawking among children in Obio/Akpor L.G.A of Rivers State, Nigeria.

Methodology: This descriptive cross-sectional study used a purposive sampling method. 109 participants aged 10 - 17 years who hawked around two busy junctions in Obio/Akpor L.G.A Rivers State, Nigeria, were recruited for the study. An interviewer-administered questionnaire was used for data collection. Analysis was done with SPSS version 25.

Results: Participants comprised 109 child street hawkers, 67 (61.5%) female, 42 (38.5%) males. 72 (66.1%) of the participants lived with their parents, and more than half of their parents were traders. Reasons for hawking included the need to augment the family income, having lost a parent, and being forced by a guardian to hawk. 104 (95.4%) of the children reported not liking to hawk. 33 (30.3%) of the child street hawkers were school dropouts; more females, 27 (40.3 %), were school dropouts compared to their male counterparts, 6 (14.3 %). This sex difference was statistically significant ($\chi^2= 8.27$, $p= 0.004$). Problems encountered while hawking included: accidents, loss of money and goods, exposure to harsh weather, low self-esteem, and sexual advances.

Conclusion: Street hawking among children is common despite its adverse effects on children. Education of the masses on the dangers of this menace is needed, and measures to alleviate poverty among the populace need to be radically pursued.

Keywords: Street, Hawking, Children, Abuse, Child Labour, Social Paediatrics

Introduction

Street hawking is the most dominant form of child labour in Nigeria. ⁽¹⁾ It is a form of child abuse or maltreatment. The terms child abuse and child maltreatment are frequently used interchangeably. The World Health Organization (WHO) defines child maltreatment as all forms of physical, emotional maltreatment, sexual abuse, negligence or exploitation that take place in the life of an individual before the age of 18 years resulting in real harm or has the tendency to cause harm to the child's health in terms of their chances of survival, dignity or development in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power ⁽²⁾ According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), in 2020, about 152 million children between the ages of 5 and 17 years were working and were out of school. ³ This translates to 1 out of every 10 children hawking instead of attending school, and half of these children are continuously exposed to hazardous work, affecting their health. ⁽³⁾ Most of them are exposed to working for very long hours, up to 10 hours a day. Although there has been a global decline in child labour in the last two decades, it has remained a scourge and a widespread phenomenon in sub-Saharan Africa with untoward consequences, hence the need to be eliminated. ^(1,3)

According to the ILO, child labour is work that deprives children of their childhood, potential, and dignity, which can harm the child's physical and mental development. ⁽⁴⁾ It is work done by children that is mentally, physically, socially, and morally dangerous and harmful to them. It affects their schooling by depriving them of the opportunity to stay in school, forcing them to leave school prematurely or requiring them to combine education with working. ⁽⁵⁾ Many families in Nigeria live below the poverty line; hence, parents may be compelled to choose which of their children to pull out of school and engage in labour that can help augment the family income. Unfortunately, this choice often falls on the girl child. ⁽⁵⁾

As street hawking has become a part of our culture, it is easy to forget that it is also a form of child abuse. When children are sent out into the streets to hawk, it has attendant negative consequences on the child. A study done in South-West Nigeria among female Adolescent Street hawkers found that 69.0% had been sexually abused. Among those who experienced sexual abuse, 67.5% of them did not seek help. ⁽⁶⁾ These children are exposed to sexually transmitted diseases, unwanted pregnancy and forced to drop out of school. ⁽⁶⁾

Street hawking is commonly seen in urban areas in Nigeria. Although it can enhance the economic power of the families involved, the attendant consequences to the child cannot be overlooked. Children's involvement in street hawking has led to increased illiteracy rates, prostitution, exposure to accidents, kidnap, ritual killings, alcohol and drug addiction, and involvement in social vices, especially among male children. This study, therefore, examines the pattern, determinants, and effects of street hawking among children in Obio/Akpor Local Government Area in Rivers State of Nigeria.

Methodology

Study Design:

A descriptive cross-sectional study was carried out among adolescents aged 10-17 years over three months (July-September 2021).

Study Area

This study was carried out in the Obio/Akpor LGA of Rivers State, Nigeria, around two busy junctions where children hawk – Rumuokoro and Choba junctions.

Study Population

Children aged 10-17 years who hawked around the two busy junctions in Obio/Akpor L. G. A were recruited for the study.

Sample size calculation

The formula for estimating a single proportion was used⁽⁷⁾, with a prevalence of 84%, the proportion of juvenile street hawkers from a previous Nigeria study involving children involved in an accident while hawking,⁽⁸⁾ at a confidence limit of 95% and 10% accommodation for non-response. A total of 109 child hawkers participated in the study.

Sampling method: The sampling method employed for this study was a purposive sampling method with occasional snowballing. The inclusion criteria were adolescents aged 10-17 years who assented to the study, who were seen hawking around the junctions and could speak and

understand Pidgin English. Every consecutive child hawker who met the inclusion criteria participated until the sample size was met.

Data collection: A structured interviewer-administered questionnaire was used for data collection. It was pretested among 20 hawkers over two weeks for the study's face validity, content validity, and feasibility. The Cronbach's alpha value (internal validity) of the questionnaire was 0.86. Following the receipt of feedback, the final questionnaire was designed.

The questionnaire had three sections - socio-demographic variables, history of street hawking and participant's perception of street hawking. To ensure that a participant was not repeatedly interviewed, participants were asked if the research assistants had interviewed them before administering the questionnaires. Also, their ages were obtained by asking the participants for their ages to determine if they met the inclusion criteria. The research assistants spent 1-2 hours every day, mainly in the evenings, administering the questionnaires.

Analysis was done with SPSS version 25, and descriptive statistics were done. Results were expressed in proportions, percentages, frequency tables and graphs. Chi-square was conducted to compare subgroups with a p-value set at less than 0.05.

Ethical consideration: Approval for this study was obtained from the Rivers State Ministry of Health. Written permission was obtained from some participants' parents who were also hawking or selling in shops around the junctions and from adults who were also seen hawking with the children. Verbal assent was obtained from all participants.

Results

A total of 109 children participated in this study. Forty-two (38.5%) were males, while 67 (61.5%) were females, with a male to female ratio of 1: 1.6. Their ages ranged from 10 to 17 years, with a mean age of 15.62 +/- 2.12 years. Fifty-seven (52.3%) of the study participants had attained secondary education. 72 (66.0%) lived with their parents, and only 9 (8.3%) and 6 (5.5%) lived with no relatives and alone, respectively. About half of the parents of the study participants were traders themselves. (Table I)

Most 104 (95.4%) participants said they did not like to hawk on the street. The hawking was done mainly to improve family income 89 (81.6%). Fifty-Eight (53.3%) had hawked for 1-3 years, while 29 (26.6%) had hawked for more than 3 years.

Regarding the frequency of hawking, 74 (67.9%) hawked at least three times a week, while 19 (17.4%) hawked every day. All the participants reported that they had experienced some hazards during hawking.

Multiple responses were reported concerning the perceived effect of street hawking on participants' education. Being fatigued and experiencing sleepiness in class was reported among 95 (87.2%) participants, low self-esteem among their peers 76 (69.7%), school absenteeism 70 (64.2%) and poor academic performance 67 (61.5%) (Table II).

Of the 109 participants, 33 (30.3%) were school dropouts. More females, 27 (40.3%), dropped out of school than their male counterparts, 6 (14.3%). This sex difference was statistically significant, $p= 0.004$. Fig 1. The common hazards reported included accidents, loss of their wares and money, low self-esteem, lack of leisure time and sexual advances (Table II).

Table I: Socio-demographic characteristics of participants

Variables	Frequency	Percentages
Sex		
Males	42	38.5
Females	67	61.5
Age group in years		
10-12	41	37.6
13-15	48	44.0
16-18	20	18.4
Level of education		
Primary	49	45.0
Secondary	57	52.3
Tertiary	3	2.7
Whom respondent resides with		
Parents	72	66.0
Relatives	22	20.2
Non-relatives	9	8.3
Alone	6	5.5
Occupation of Father		
Commercial driver	7	6.4
Farmer	6	5.5
Trader	53	48.6
Civil servant	28	25.7
Artisan	15	13.8
Occupation of Mother		
Civil servant	13	11.9
Trader	58	53.2
Housewife	16	14.7
Farmer	22	20.2
Total	109	100.0

Table II: Hawking experience and reasons given for hawking among respondents

Variables	Frequency	Percentages
Do you like hawking?		
No	104	95.4
Yes	5	4.6
Total	109	100.0
Reasons for hawking		
To support my family to pay fees	39	35.8
My parents asked me to hawk	37	33.9
Loss of parent	13	11.9
For personal upkeep	12	11.0
My guardian asked me to	8	7.3
Total	109	100.0
Problems encountered during hawking *		
Accident	105	96.3
Loss of goods and money	103	94.5
Low self-esteem	102	93.6
Violent behaviour	94	86.2
Lack of leisure	93	85.3
Tiredness	93	85.3
Exposure to harsh weather	90	82.6
Sexual advances	87	79.8
Duration of hawking		
< 1 year	22	20.2
1-3 years	58	53.2
> 3 years	29	26.6
Total	109	100.0
Frequency of hawking		
Every day	19	17.4
At least three times a week	74	67.9
Only weekends	9	8.3
Only during holidays	7	6.4
Total	109	100.0
Effect hawking has on school*		
It makes me tired and sleepy in class	95	87.2
Low self-esteem	76	69.7
I do not study well at home	74	67.9
School absenteeism	70	64.2
Poor performance in academics	67	61.5

*Multiple responses obtained

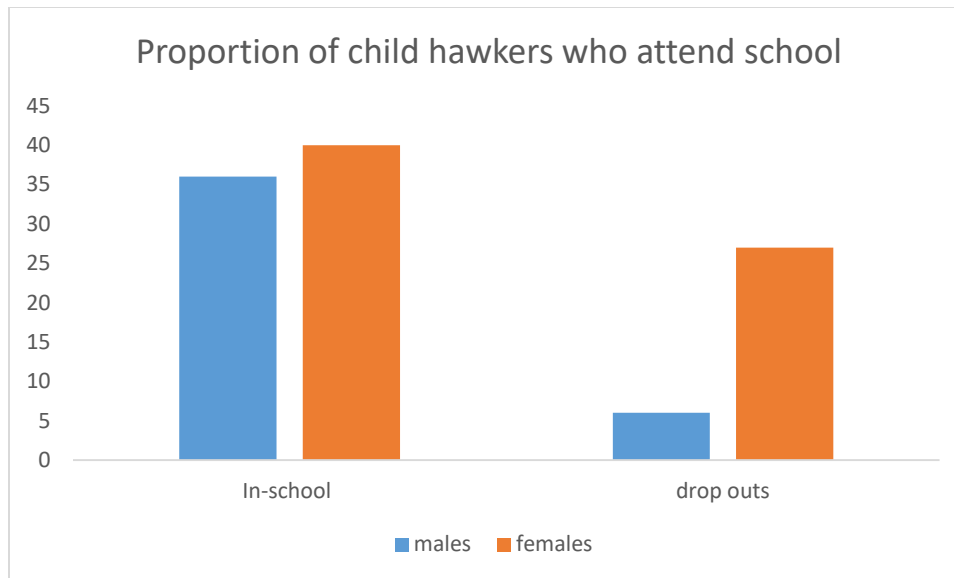


Fig. 1: Proportion of child hawkers who are out of school

$$\chi^2 = 8.27, df=1, P = 0.004$$

Discussion

This paper examined street hawking among children in Obio/Akpor L.G.A, Rivers State of Nigeria - the demographic distribution, reasons for hawking, hazards faced while hawking and the effect hawking has on the participants' schooling.

The finding of this study shows that more females than their male counterparts were involved in hawking. This finding agrees with other studies that reported that girls were used more often for street hawking.^(9, 10) This finding may result from the culture and gender role assigned to females making them more involved in domestic activities and other forms of child labour. **This, however, contrasts with findings from Johnson and Ihesie⁽³⁾ among street hawkers in Uyo, Nigeria⁽¹¹⁾ where it was reported that male adolescents made up the more significant chunk of street hawking adolescents.** More than 80% of the participants in this study were less than 16 years of age, an age group vulnerable to all forms of abuse and social vices.⁽¹¹⁻¹³⁾ This finding is similar to several other studies in Nigeria. For instance, Magaji & Sarka⁽¹⁰⁾ reported that 69.8% of the child hawkers were less than 16 years.

In contrast, Iyela and Ikwuakam⁽¹⁴⁾ reported that the majority of the child hawkers were below the age of 17 years. This may be because, at this age, they are still very much under parental authority, and it is their parents that use them for this labour, as reported in this present study. It could also be because this age group is a source of cheap labour and can be easily exploited. This is worrisome because this age group should be under the supervision of their parents or caregivers, as their peers can negatively influence them to engage in social vices. However, the finding of this study is at variance with Alonge et al.⁽¹⁵⁾ who opined that older adolescents were more involved in hawking in Oyo State than the younger ones.

The majority (66.0%) of the participants in this study lived with their parents. Most of the parents were traders themselves and other low skilled workers with earnings that may not be sufficient for their families' upkeep. This finding is similar to other previous studies. ^(11, 16-18) This may explain why many children are used for street hawking, as their parents need to augment the family income.

The majority of the participants did not like to hawk, as observed in this study; a finding that agrees with Akpotor⁽¹⁹⁾ in a study carried out in Delta State, Nigeria. This indicates total neglect of the government's implementation of the Child's Right Act.

As seen in this study, assisting the family financially is a finding that several other studies have reported as a reason for juvenile street hawking. ^(10, 11, 19) Parents may not view this as a form of abuse. Instead, it may be regarded as the children's support to their family to improve their family income.

Children encounter a lot of problems while hawking. This study shows that these hazards range from physical assault to accidents, lack of leisure, and sexual advances. This is similar to finding from another study. ⁽²⁰⁾ These hazards can lead to physical and psychological trauma or even their demise. Therefore, there is a need to protect these children against child abuse.

About (73.4%) of this study participants had hawked for less than three years, while (67.9%) hawked at least three times a week. This is similar to a report from Delta State⁽¹⁹⁾ and Kaduna State⁽¹⁰⁾ Nigeria. These children may not have leisure time, may not enjoy their childhood and are very prone to psychological disturbance, which will not allow them to achieve their maximum potential.

The perceived effect of child street hawking on participants' education ranged from excessive sleepiness in class, low self-esteem among peers in school, school absenteeism and poor academic performance, which is comparable with finding from Abdu *et al.* ⁽²¹⁾ in their study on the effect of child labour on children's education in Katsina State, Nigeria. Child street hawkers are prone to dropping out of school or not furthering their education ⁽²²⁾. Hence, the finding from this present study where 30.3% of the participants were school dropouts. Similar results were reported in Delta⁽¹⁹⁾ and Ibadan⁽¹⁵⁾ among juvenile street hawkers. Though both males and females may drop out of school due to hawking, more girls are affected than their male counterparts, as observed in this study. Atomatofa⁽²³⁾ reported a similar finding among children who engaged in street hawking and observed that it had a negative effect on their educational achievements and threatened their future career ambitions.

This implies that the education of these children will be hampered, and the hope of education as a fundamental right of every child will not be achieved. If allowed to remain on the street, these children will have poor education, which will lead to low productivity in the future, thereby continuing the cycle of poor education, low productivity, and poverty.

Conclusion: Street hawking among children has a lot of adverse effects on the child's development. The hazards faced by children can affect their physical and psychological health. It also affects the education of the children. It can breed an unending cycle of poverty, seeing that

they are made to indulge in this practice due to the parent's inability to make ends meet. This deprives them of their right to education. There is a need for proper implementation and monitoring of the Child's Right Act to protect these children against this form of abuse.

COMPETING INTERESTS DISCLAIMER:

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist. The products used for this research are commonly and predominantly used products in our area of research and country. There is no conflict of interest between the authors and producers of the products because we do not intend to use these products as an avenue for litigation but the advancement of knowledge. Also, the research was not funded by the producing company; rather, it was funded by the personal efforts of the authors.

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