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# "Baby Factories": Exploitation of Women in Southern Nigeria

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# "Baby Factories": Exploitation of Women in Southern Nigeria

## **Abstract**

Despite the writings of feminist thinkers and efforts of other advocates of feminism to change the dominant narratives on women, exploitation of women is a fact that has remained endemic in various parts of the world, and particularly in Africa. Nigeria is one of those countries in Africa where women are largely exposed to varying degrees of exploitation. This paper examines the development and proliferation of baby-selling centers in southern Nigeria and its impacts on and implication for women in Nigeria. It demonstrates how an attempt to give protection to unwed pregnant girls has metamorphosed into "baby harvesting" and selling through the notorious "baby factories," where young women are held captive and used like industrial machines for baby production. The babies produced through this process were often sold illegally to adoptive parent(s) in dire need of them. In some other instances, they were used for child labour or trafficked for prostitution, ritual purposes, or organ harvesting. The paper argues that the hideous phenomenon of baby factories—which has high patronage in southern parts of Nigeria—does not only exploit and debase the status of women, but that the nature of its operation foreshadows a future danger for women in southern Nigeria regions.

## **Keywords**

Nigeria, baby factory, baby harvesting, exploitation, southern Nigeria

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## **“BABY FACTORIES”: EXPLOITATION OF WOMEN IN SOUTHERN NIGERIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Despite the writings of feminist thinkers and efforts of other advocates of feminism to change the dominant narratives on women, exploitation of women is a fact that has remained endemic in various parts of the world, and particularly in Africa. Nigeria is one of those countries in Africa where women are largely exposed to varying degrees of exploitation. This paper examines the development and proliferation of baby-selling centers in southern Nigeria and its impacts on and implication for women in Nigeria. It demonstrates how an attempt to give protection to unwed pregnant girls has metamorphosed into “baby harvesting” and selling through the notorious “baby factories,” where young women are held captive and used like industrial machines for baby production. The babies produced through this process were often sold illegally to adoptive parent(s) in dire need of them. In some other instances, they were used for child labour or trafficked for prostitution, ritual purposes, or organ harvesting. The paper argues that the hideous phenomenon of baby factories—which has high patronage in southern parts of Nigeria—does not only exploit and debase the status of women, but that the nature of its operation foreshadows a future danger for women in southern Nigeria regions.

### **KEYWORDS**

baby factory, baby harvesting, gender violence, exploitation, southern Nigeria

Nigeria is one of those African countries that have recorded an increase in child adoption in the last two decades (Avidime *et al.*, 2013; Omosun and Kofoworola, 2011). Unfortunately, such upward mobility in formal adoption has inaugurated a new trend—“baby harvesting” through “baby factories”—mostly in its southern part with some implications for women. This paper explores the evolution of this new trend in southern Nigeria and its impacts on and implication for women. It seeks to answer the following questions: What underlies the evolution and spread of “baby factories” in Nigeria? How has the new trend impacted women? What are the implications of this new phenomenon for women in Nigeria? The paper, which is an exploratory case study, takes the hypothetical perspective that the upsurge of “baby factories” in southern Nigeria has engineered a new instrument of exploitation in the region.

The development of “baby factories” as an avenue for illegal adoption and human trafficking has gained some scholarly attention in the recent times. However, dominant scholarly literature on this phenomenon focused on its explanation (Smolin, 2007; Onyemelukwe-Onuoha, 2013), and its political economy (Okoli, 2014; Makinde, 2015; Makinde, Olaleye, Makinde, Huntley, & Brown, 2017). In furtherance of this new scholarly trend, possible ways of addressing the challenges of this illegal operation were explored (Alichie, 2014; Makinde, 2015; Eseadi, Achagh, Ikechukwu-Ilomuanya, & Ogbuabor, 2015). To establish the context of this research, a detailed study of the available scholarly literature revealed a gap on the origin and proliferation of this phenomenon in Nigeria, as well as the analysis of its impact on and future implications for women. This research is focused on tracing the historical development of “baby harvesting” through “baby factories” in Nigeria; with the ultimate aim of identifying its general impacts on young women used as “baby producers.” The study will equally explore the future implications of this phenomenon for women in southern Nigeria where it is most prevalent.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Gender can be construed as the roles and responsibilities of men and women defined in families, societies and cultures (UNESCO, 2003). It can also be viewed as social construction of men’s and women’s roles in a given culture or location. In other words, gender is attributes or opportunities that are associated with being male or female, which are socially constructed and learned through socialization process (OCHA, 2012). From the above, gender roles are not same with sex roles which are biologically determined. According to the Convention for Biological Diversity (CBD) (2017), gender is not based on biological differences between men and women, but rather shaped by culture, social relations, and natural environment. By implication, childbearing is within the biological function of women and so outside the gender roles. However, in virtually all human societies, childbearing is socially imposed. Except in cases where they are set apart for religious functions, most human societies frown at women opting out of marriage or childbearing. It is based on this that infertility in most cultures attracts social stigmatization. Social expectation about gender starts from the moment a child is born. A female child, in addition to her biologically imposed role at birth, is socially bound to bear children. Therefore, childbearing is both within the sex and the gender roles of a female.

Exploitation as a concept is explained from various dimensions. According to the Pearshall and Trumble (1996), there are two approaches to the understanding of exploitation. The first views exploitation as making use of or deriving benefits from something or a situation. This is a technical meaning which is neither negative nor positive. The second approach, which is normative, defines exploitation as taking advantage of a person for one’s own end. The attachment of exploitation to a person links exploitation to weakness or vulnerability. It is this weakness or vulnerability that is exploited by a stronger person. To exploit a person is therefore to use the weakness or vulnerability of the person to gain substantial control of the person’s life or labour (Honderich, 2005). In this sense, power becomes a very crucial factor in exploitation.

Interestingly, this definition is not generally perceived as wrong because the power differentiation which is inevitable in human interactions is, as Honderich (2005) argues, not necessarily unjust. Exploitation becomes wrong when it is situ-

ated within the context of injustice. To exploit a person wrongly implies taking unfair advantage of a person's vulnerability in a way that will harm the victim (Feinberg, 1987). Thus, exploitation has been used as an umbrella concept to encapsulate harmful practices (ACHR, 1981). Such harm may be physical, psychological, or emotional. It is a setback on one's interest, development, and growth. It may be immediate or future implications of unfair advantage taking earlier.

It is pertinent to note that consent does not neutralize exploitation especially when it is achieved through the use of force, threat, fraud, deception, abuse of a position of vulnerability (UNODC, 2015). In other words, the consent of the victim becomes irrelevant when any of these means is used. For consent to be relevant in exploitation, it, as Vrousalis (2011) argues, has to be free, rational and informed consent.

## **Data and Methods**

This research was conducted in the three geo-political zones—south-east, south, and south-west Nigeria. Due to the trans-disciplinary nature of the study, an eclectic approach bestriding the fields of history and sociology (historical sociology) was adopted. Thus, data collection method involved triangulations within a qualitative framework. Data was sought through field-based primary sources, namely, in-depth oral interview (IDI), focused group discussions (FGD), and direct observation. Data from these sources were generated from first hand informants, which included rescued victims, police men, arrested operators in police custody, and knowledgeable inhabitants around the locations of baby factories. Social workers in orphanages and other institutions of adoption were also sought for information. Purposive and random samplings were used in sourcing for the informants. Also, other knowledgeable informants were reached through snow-balling.

Thirty (30) in-depth oral interviews were conducted in the course of the field work. Included in the information sourced were: motivations for operating "baby factories;" means of recruitment; and the nature of operations. Four (4) focus group discussions were conducted. These were used to elicit information on the evolution and spread of "baby factories" and its implications in the 21st century Nigeria. Written documents such as police and newspaper reports, books, and journal articles were sourced from libraries, media houses, police stations, orphanages, and social welfare departments. In addition to core information contained in some of them, they helped in our understanding of the level of scholarly attention on "baby trafficking" in Nigeria. Data presentation and analysis was done from the perspective of historical sociology and therefore descriptive and normative.

## **Results and Discussions**

### **Explaining the Historical Evolution of "Baby Factories" in Southern Nigeria**

From the middle of the 1980s, baby dumping or the abandoning of babies became one of the serious human right issues challenging Nigerian society (Egbue, 2001; Ojedokun & Atoi, 2012). This was confirmed by some of our respondents who recalled that places like Okpoko and Obodoukwu Streets in Onitsha, Uwani, and Coal Camp in Enugu, Ohanku and Ngwa Road in Aba, Ugbague, in Benin city, and Ajagunle in Lagos were notorious for baby dumping in the 1980s and 1990s (P.M. Ajayi, Personal Communication, 3 April 2014; D. Obidi, Personal Communication, 14 December 2017; S.U. Ezeani, Personal Communication, 12 December 2016; B. Onukwu, Personal Communication, 5 January 2018; Focused Group Dis-

discussion, 9 August 2015). According to Onukwu (Personal Communication, 5 January 2018), more than 265 cases of abandoned babies were recorded in Umuahia and Owerri between 1989 and 1992. Akni and Erhabor (cited in Ojedokun and Atoi, 2012) in their research identified more than 140 cases of baby dumping in Port Harcourt between 1999 and 2003. Between 2006 and 2008, a total of 84 cases of abandoned babies were recorded in the Oyo State Register of the Child Care Unit (Alichie, 2014).

It was the view of our respondents that high incidence of promiscuity brought about by globalization and its concomitant socio-economic strains explained the phenomenon of abandoned baby during this period (Focused Group Discussion, 2015). This was further confirmed by Huntley (2013), Charles *et al* (2014), Onuoha (2014), and Ojedokun & Atoi (2012), who ranked poverty as the most important cause of baby dumping in Nigeria. Sociocultural practices were also found to be among the common explanations for the abandoned-baby syndrome from the 1980s (Agbo, 2014; Focused Group Discussion, 2015). Consequently, both governmental and non-governmental bodies embarked on picking of and caring for these babies. By the close of the 1980s, formal institutions of adoption where traumatized babies were sheltered and nursed had become a distinct feature of every state in southern Nigeria (Onukwu, Personal Communication, 5 January 2018; Obidi, Personal Communication, 14 December 2017; Focused Group Discussion, 2015).

It was within this context that “compassionate homes” or “needy homes” developed for the first time in Nigeria. These were homes where pregnant teenage girls rejected by their families on the account of their pregnancy were sheltered and rehabilitated until they deliver their babies. By the close of the 1980s, teenage pregnancy had become prevalent in most communities of the region under study (Focused Group Discussion, 2015). Girls in such conditions were often spotted in large number, a month or two after the Christmas period. These girls who were mostly found in the rural areas were usually lured into sexual activities through attractive offers made by city boys and men who returned home during festive periods. Unaccustomed to safe sex, the results of their sexual explorations were usually teenage pregnancy. Due to the social stigma attached to such condition, they were in most cases unwelcomed in their homes. High incidences of teenage pregnancy during this period were equally explained by poor parental upbringing.

Consequently, some religious organizations, like the Catholic Women Organization, adopted some punitive measures against their members whose daughters were impregnated before marriage. Girls found to be pregnant were either chased out of their homes by their parents, or in some cases, ran out on their own to roam the street without food and shelter. Vulnerable and helpless, they were often victims of unsafe abortion. The pitiable state in which these girls often found themselves moved some religious men and women with the thought of providing homes for them, hence the “compassionate or needy homes.” The first of its kind was established by Rev. Fr. Onuju in Owerri to care for those around his area of ministry. Although established as a place of shelter and care for pregnant girls who were rejected by their parents, the needy homes gradually became homes where parents, relatives, and friends willingly, sent unmarried girls with teenage pregnancies for protection and psychological healing (P.T. Agbakoba, Personal Communication, 13 December 2015; Onukwu, Personal Communication, 5 January 2018). From Owerri where it was noticed first, this practice spread to other parts of southern Nigeria and beyond.

The aim of "compassionate homes," according to Agbakoba (Personal Communication, 13 December 2015), was to give protection to mother and child from traumatic experience associated with their condition and secure a home for the baby in the case where the mother or the family expressed their unwillingness to keep the baby. Thus, upon delivery, the girl was given the options of going home with the baby or permit the legal adoption of the baby by the compassionate home. A record of the Mother of Christ Compassionate Home Onitsha showed that about 58 per cent of the babies delivered between 1999 and 2002 went home with their mothers (MCH, 2003).

One major advantage of compassionate homes is that in most cases pregnant girls were not only protected from hunger, harsh weather, and unsafe abortion, they were equally shielded from the shame and stigma of their status. Consequently, a pregnant girl can be integrated into her society which may or may not be privy to her previous status. From our interviews with the proprietors of three compassionate homes, we learned that more than half of the teenage girls who delivered in their homes between 1995 and 2003 completed their studies after they had left the homes (Agbakoba, Personal Communication, 13 December 2015; Onukwu, Personal Communication, 5 January 2018; D.C. Mmadueme, Personal Communication, 17 November 2017).

Unfortunately, this attempt to give physical and psychological protections to unwed pregnant girls through "needy homes" has generated a new phenomenon known as "baby factory."

"Baby factories" is a term used for places where young girls are secluded for the purpose of producing babies for illegal adoptions, rituals, and other purposes (British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) News 7 January 2007). They became associated with southern Nigeria from 2006 when UNESCO reported for the first time their presence in the region. By 2008, radio and newspaper reports awakened the general public to the multiplication of these centers in some major cities of southern Nigeria — Aba, Owerri, Port Harcourt, Asaba, Lagos, Umuahia, and Onitsha.

The clandestine businesses are operated by those who are hunting for pregnant girls or vulnerable young women through whom they acquire babies for sale, i.e. "baby harvesting." Despite the efforts of the police and other security agents in hunting for the operators, "baby harvesting" through "baby factories" was on the increase from 2006 when it was first reported officially in 2015 (see Table 1). The rate at which such centers proliferated was alarming (UNESCO, 2006; Madike, 2013).

One of the most significant developments that facilitated the emergence and spread of "baby factories" in southern Nigeria is the high rate of infertility in the country. Although infertility is prevalent worldwide with an estimated 580 million people experiencing it in their reproductive lives, more than half of the number (about 372 million people—180 million couples) reside in low and middle-income countries with the exclusion of China (WHO, 2000). Africa is said to be sharing the largest burden of infertility with an average of 10 - 32 per cent of couples being infertile (Okonofua, 2005). Research has shown that primary infertility has been on the increase in Nigeria since 1990. According to Okonofua (2005), the Nigerian DHS survey from 1994 to 2000 reported a prevalent rate of primary infertility of 22.7 per cent in 15 -49 year-old women and 7.1 per cent in 25 - 49 years-old women.

**Table 1: Reported Number of Women Rescued from Baby Factories (Makinde, Olaleye, Makinde, Huntley, & Brown, 2017)**

Month and Year	Location	Number of Women Rescued
May 2006	Enugu	25
January–March 2010	Aba	77
June 2011	Aba	32
October 2011	Lagos	17
May 2013	Enugu	6
May 2013	Aba	9
June 2013	Aba	16
June 2013	Orlu	26
June 2013	Ondo	5
December 2013	Owerri	17
January 2014	Ondo	5
March 2014	Ogun	8
May 2014	Okigwe	16
April 2015	Umuahia	12
August 2015	Asaba	8

Further evidence from clinical practices has revealed that infertility constitutes a major burden on clinical service delivery in Nigeria with more than 50 per cent of gynecological caseloads constituting over 80 per cent of laparoscopic procedures (Okonofua, 2005). The above statistical evidence was confirmed by information from an assisted reproductive center in Lagos—Nordica Clinic—which revealed that about 40 - 50 per cent of consultations in gynecological clinic in the country are for infertility affecting 20 - 25 per cent of married couples (Fertility World, 2006). Hence, as the rate of infertility in the country rose, the number of couples in search of a solution to the social stigma attached to childlessness burgeoned. It is this increasing search for an end to the problem of infertility and its concomitant social stress that provides a demand for baby-selling center (Focused Group Discussion, 2017).

The phenomenon of “baby factories” is equally explicable from the inaccessibility of approved institutions where adoption can be legally procured. The legal adoption process has a lot of encumbrances that make it less accessible to adoptive parents. Stringent demands and requirements for adopting a child keep away some adoptive parents who may not meet those requirements. For example, prospective single adopters face more challenges than couples in the process of adoption in Nigeria. In the same way, a low-income earner may not be able to meet all the needed requirements for adopting a baby through an orphanage. Arguably, formal adoption in Nigeria is not for the poor. In addition to these procedural challenges is the long period of waiting for babies. Since most of these formally established institutions depend on abandoned babies and orphans, couples wanting babies for



adoption often spend months and years waiting (F. Kolade, Personal Communication, 9 January 2018). To avoid such long waiting and other encumbrances associated with adoption, childless couples look out for alternative which "baby factories" provide.

The emergence of baby-selling centers in southern Nigeria can equally be explained from religious manipulations and occult practices rampant in the region. As the number of people who patronize various cults and shrines increases, chances of manipulations by agents of these spiritual houses increase as well. It is common to find ritualists demanding human life—a baby, fetus, or human organs to perform rituals or prepare medicine for their clients. The quest for overnight riches by any means has been the basis for which many shrines and cults thrive in southern Nigeria (Focused Group Discussion, 2016). One's determination to get rich by any means implies a willingness to meet the requirements demanded by the ritual performer. In this case, "baby factories" become their point of call. Some of our respondents who live within and around the location of "baby factories" shed some light on the kinds of people often seen moving into walled buildings used for this illegal operation.

I used to think that people go into the house for herbal cure. However, when I began to give a thought to the flashy cars that move in and out of the house, I suspected that something more than treatment may be taking place there (T.S. Solomom, Personal Communication, 22 November 2017).

Another informant noted that it was the night traffic in and out of a compound on his street that aroused his suspicious. The compound was later found to be a baby-selling center (O.B. Eze, Personal Communication, 7 September 2016).

The phenomenon of "baby harvesting" can be further explained from the desire of adopters to hide the identity of the adopted baby. Despite the obvious gravitation towards formal adoption in the last two decades, the adopted baby is still resisted in most societies in southern Nigeria. Such unacceptability arises from pervasive cultural traditions and socio-economic realities that propel many to go in search of an alternative to formal adoption. While a good number will prefer to go against the teachings of some religious denominations on polygamy rather than adopt, others do opt for Assisted Reproductive Technology (ART). There are those who remain childless waiting on God. The fourth category of people in need of children adopts clandestine ways of shielding the identity of the adopted child through "baby harvesting" method, hence, the growth of baby-selling centers.

"Baby harvesting" thrives in southern Nigeria due to corruption. Corruption among law enforcement agents and judges makes the arrest and prosecution of operators of baby-selling centers inefficient. There is evidence that some of the operators arrested were released without prosecution. For instance, the owner of Uzoma Maternity Clinic in Enugu was arrested on two occasions in 2006 and 2008 and released within few days. In one occasion, the accused was granted bail with the case adjourned indefinitely for the State Attorney General opinion which, according to available information, never came (Adepegba, 2010). Similarly, a "baby factory" in Imo State disguised with the name "Cross Foundation Clinic" was raided by the police in 2011 and 2013 during which its owner was arrested, detained, and released after a few days without being prosecuted. While some of the operators relocate to new places after their release, while others remain at their initial operating centers with the hope of bribing their way through (Focused Group Discussion, 2015). There was a strong indication that some policemen often

avoid obvious notorious “baby factory” syndicates in towns because the owners negotiate their way with cash payments which are occasionally made to law enforcement agents (Focused Group Discussion, 2017). Failure to prosecute those caught in the act of selling babies has encouraged the spread of this illegal business.

Finally, the phenomenon of “baby harvesting” is a product of economic stress and its concomitant poverty ravaging the Nigerian society. Most of those rescued from baby-selling centers were secondary school drop outs and young women who failed in their small businesses. They claimed to have been lured into the business with promises of a job, money, and in some cases, suitors. One of the eight pregnant girls rescued by the Delta State Police Command in 2015 recalled how poverty pushed her into the hands of a baby factory operator:

I was looking for work and my brother brought me to Asaba and I was introduced to the operator who offered me job in his proposed polythene-producing factory located in Asaba. That was where the police arrested us (National Television Authority (NTA) Network News, 6 July 2015).

Charles, Akwara and Andeshi (2014), in affirming this, argued that abject poverty is the primary motivation that propels young mothers to give up their babies for money. Similarly, operators of “baby-making factories” interviewed claimed they were driven into such business by poverty (B.M. Boniface, Personal Communication, 22 November 2017; E. Chigozie, Personal Communication, 14 November 2017; A. Ndubuisi, Personal Communication, 2 March 2015). The rising rate of unemployment has left more than 50 per cent of Nigerians in poverty (NBS, 2009). Consequently, any opportunity of survival is grabbed irrespective of its consequences on the society

### **A New Instrument of Exploitation**

A major impact of the proliferation of baby-selling centers is that it leaves women used as industrial machines totally debased and exploited in all stages of its operation. From our findings, there are three exploitative ways of recruiting these women. The first category of women was made up of unwed pregnant girls. Due to social stigmatization of those who conceived out of wedlock, most of them, as earlier noted, often run out of their homes. Their vulnerability makes them a ready source of recruitment for baby hunters used by the operators of baby-selling centers. The girls are lured to these places through various promises among which are safe abortion, marriage, job opportunities, and monetary compensation. Eight out of 26 people rescued by the Police from Ahameful Motherless Babies Home in Imo State in 2013 claimed they came to the place to deliver their babies and receive some money to either continue with their education or trade (Television News Channel [TVC] News, 2013). All these are obvious cases of the vulnerable conditions of these young women which were exploited by merchants of babies.

In addition to pregnant women, non-pregnant teenage girls, and young adult women form another category of those hunted by baby harvesters. A high rate of youth unemployment in Nigeria leaves many in a desperate state of poverty. In their determination to survive, women fall prey to baby scouters used by commercial baby operators and women traffickers. Job and marriage offers were found to be the most alluring of all offers. Upon arrival, they are turned into human machines producing babies for illegal adoption and other commercial purposes. Most of the women rescued from a baby-selling center known as Ahameful Motherless Babies Home in Njaba L.G. A of Imo State in 2013, claimed they were impregnated

(in some cases through rape) upon arrival (F. Ogbonnaya, Personal Communication, 16 August 2017).

Finally, baby scouters create a source for babies for sale by holding women for baby-making after their first delivery. In his interaction with the officials of Safe World for women, Inspector Katsina affirmed that most of the girls rescued by the police in Abia and Imo states were those forced to become pregnant upon arrival (Safe World for Women, 2014). This is an indication that, both those who come to deliver their babies and the others in search of jobs or other benefits, are in most cases denied their freedom of movement and choice of leaving the premises. We learned that attempts to escape were punished with beatings, starvation, verbal abuse, and death threats.

Beyond recruitment, operations in "baby factories" reveal a high degree of exploitation, intimidation, and abuse of the women used for production. The buildings used for the "baby factory" businesses are heavily secured to prevent the women from escaping. High walls with appealing inscriptions are used to shield the premise from the public.<sup>1</sup> Some of the girls rescued by the police from an illegal business in Umuaka in Imo State reported that the compound was built in a way that made escape impossible. It was fenced with high walls which prevented any visitor to enter except the madam (the owner of the facilities) and the Oyibo (the agent responsible for impregnating the girls). As a further step towards restriction of interactions with outsiders, the women are usually denied access to their phones. Where an operator appears to be liberal, new telephones are provided or the old phones had all existing contacts deleted were deleted.

Furthermore, recruited women are subjected to all forms of sexual exploitations including rape. Such exploitative acts are usually carried out by either the operator (s) or employed agents. In some cases, both the operators and the agents are involved in impregnating the inmates. To subject these women to sexual abuse, they are sometimes exposed to substances that makes it difficult for them to resist the sexual advances. Some of our respondents claimed that refusal to succumb was often accompanied by threats, including physical violence. Our findings revealed that a woman may be raped by more than one man before and during her gestation period.<sup>2</sup> Thus, the operators do not only exploit the women financially, they use them for their sexual gratification.

To minimize expenses, baby harvesters ration the quantity of food given daily to the pregnant women they hold hostage. Interactions with some rescued women revealed that some operators feed the inmates only once a day. With poor nutrition and inadequate prenatal care, both mother and the unborn baby are exposed to high risk of infections that are likely to endanger their lives. Poor sanitary conditions are also a problem in the "baby factories" The deceptive nature of recruitment means that those confined in the centers are not prepared for a long stay. Hence, cloths and other sanitary requirements for pregnant women are inadequate or unavailable. In their attempts to minimize cost, operators do not put in place the necessary facilities to keep the inmates healthy. The reports of Safe World for Women officials who visited some of the factories in Imo and Abia states revealed the pitiful

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<sup>1</sup> Among the names of "baby factories" discovered by the police in the recent times were: Ahameful Motherless Babies, Uzoma Maternity Clinic, Ezuma Women and Children Rights Protection Initiatives, Cross Foundation Hospital, A Divine Herbal Clinic, and Apostolic Church

<sup>2</sup> We got to know through our interactions with some rescued girls that most of them were raped upon their refusal to be impregnated by the employed agents and operators of baby factories.

conditions of the women whom they noted were in some cases kept in uncompleted buildings or in crowded rooms with worn and dirty mattresses. A look at photographs of rescued women in Asaba, Ondo, Osisioma in Aba and Umuaka showed pale-looking pregnant women in tattered clothes with unkempt hair.<sup>3</sup>

Exploitation is further visible at the time of delivery. It is often said that the pain of child birth is soothed by the first cry of a new born baby. This is seldom the case with most women who deliver in these illegal factories. Pain remains with them as their babies are spirited away to another room where a new mother is waiting to acquire the baby.

Responding to the questions on how they manage the situation where the girls express desire to keep their babies, the proprietor of a baby factory in Aba disguised as Apostolic Church replied: “It won’t happen, we run a cash and carry business. The girls never see the babies” (Safe World for Women 2014). Though most of the girls and young women who deliver in “baby factories” are forced to sign out the babies for adoption before delivery, some of them expressed their displeasure at not being allowed to see or touch their newborn baby. “I was told that they would take care of my baby after delivery but was never told the baby will be taken away from me,” was the reply of Chinaza Nnachi to the police in Owerri after her baby was sold by the owner of Ezuma Women and Child Rights Initiative (Channels TV, 14th June, 2013). The forceful and violent sequestration of babies from their mothers by baby sellers is another dynamic of exploitation of women and girls in the 21st century Nigeria.

Finally, the lopsidedness of the sharing of the money clearly reveals another form of exploitation. Our findings show that between 2006 and 2015 a baby was sold for between \$400-\$700 for male and \$350 - 650 for female (J.D. Adewusi, Personal Communication, 10 September 2015; E. Chigozie, Personal Communication, 2017; A. Ndubuisi, Personal Communication, 2015). The mother is usually allowed about 10 – 15 per cent of the proceeds. In some cases, the girls are totally denied any share of the proceeds. Narrating her encounter with one of the notorious commercial baby sellers in Enugu, Ifeoma Idogo (quoted in Adepegba, 2010) lamented:

I was promised some money in exchange for the baby. He injected me and I went into labour. When I woke up my pregnancy had disappeared and the doctor told me that the baby had died. He didn’t give me any money.

Fearing deadly threats from the operators, these girls often accept what is offered refraining from any negative reaction that might endanger their lives.

Beyond exploiting women used as industrial machines, childless women in need of babies are deceived about the true identity of the baby they take home. Some commercial baby operating centers inject some chemicals into prospective female adopters giving them with some characteristics of pregnancy. They are then left with the instruction not to visit any other hospital until few weeks after the end of the fake gestation.

A common scenario is that a two minute-old baby delivered by a young girl in one section of a building used for “baby harvesting” is forcefully removed from the

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<sup>3</sup> Rescue operations were often reported through the media for public consumption. The women usually pregnant often appear in tattered clothes, malnourished and pale-looking.

mother and spirited into another room where a woman placed on sleeping pill will wake up to behold what she is told is her real biological child. Such deception has a lot of implications which are dealt with in the other section of this paper.

### **Implications**

One of the harmful effects of "baby harvesting" is the exposure of women used for baby production to diseases which may endanger their lives or jeopardize their future health. In a situation where a woman is exposed to sexual exploitation involving a multiple number of men whose health status are not known, chances of contacting diseases are high. According to Giwa-Osagie (2002) sexually transmitted diseases are the most common causes of infertility in Africa. If this is true, then Nigeria, particularly southern Nigeria, is at high risk of increased cases of infertility in the near future. Thus, present day couples will turn to such illegal centers later in search of babies. By implication, the existence of baby harvesting centers today foreshadows a more robust future for "baby harvesters."

Emotionally and psychologically, being exploited in a "baby factory" has implications for women used as baby producers. Stressors like social and family alienation, starvation, threats, rape, and deprivations of all kinds, produce psychological and emotional traumas which lead to mental disorder if not treated. By exposing teenage girls and young women to these stressors overtime they become predisposed to varying degrees of mental illnesses ranging from personality disorders to neurosis and psychosis. Baby harvesting through baby factories is likely to contribute in the long run to the number of cases of mental illness among the young female population in Nigeria.

In addition, "baby factories" may become feeders for brothels looking for women to be used in prostitution. Those who find themselves in baby-producing centers develop low self-esteem and may not aim high in life. Commercial sex may become a way of life for some of them as it is the only means of survival. The lucrative business of buying and selling children may equally attract a good number who may end up as child traffickers in future. Already the reports of European Union and United Nations have shown that child trafficking is the third biggest crime in Nigeria after fraud and drug trafficking (UNESCO, 2006). Nigeria therefore, stands the chance of further increasing the number of human traffickers in the near future.

Poverty appears to be one of the primary factors exposing teenage girls and young women to exploitation by baby sellers. The nature of the operation in these centers and the operator's greediness perpetuates this cycle of poverty. Deprivations, long duration of sexual exploitation and psychological trauma associated with baby-selling centers is likely to make it difficult for these women to find descent means of livelihood after their release. Our findings show that most of the girls in these centers have not completed their secondary education. Out of the 13 school dropouts rescued from Ahamefule Motherless Babies Home in 2013, five were unwilling to go back to school. Eight of them who expressed interest in completing their studies complained of financial restraints. Apparently, girls used for baby production either end up in the same situation that brought them to the center or find themselves in worst situations as they become more vulnerable from sustained psychological trauma (Focused Group Discussion, 2014).

Finally, adoption through "baby factories" may negatively affect the family structure in some Nigerian homes. Secrecy surrounding the baby business is already generating paternity disputes in some homes. According to Dr. O. Uchendu

(Personal Communication, 7 June 2017) a DNA test of two children from two families in Delta State, Nigeria, denied the supposed fathers the paternity of their children. This development was eventually traced to adoption through a “baby factory” in Port Harcourt. According to Ogbonnaya (Personal Communication, 16 August 2017) cases of similar disputes are increasingly recorded in Nigeria. In some instances, both parents are kept in the dark about the real status of the child. Indeed, nothing would be more devastating for a man or a woman than to suddenly realize that a child that calls them dad/mum does not belong to them. Deception of this nature may destabilize many homes in the near future leading to an increase in the number of broken families and single parenting. In this case, women are likely to bear the responsibility of raising single handedly rejected children by their husbands.

## **Conclusion**

Economic stagnation and social malaise orchestrated by political instability, mismanagement of the national resources and systemic corruption as well as the globalizing influence of the West created conditions that called for protection of abandoned babies and pregnant teenage girls who suffer rejection on account of their conditions. Consequently, orphanages and compassionate homes proliferated in southern Nigeria providing care and protection to vulnerable babies and unwed pregnant girls. Unfortunately, increased cases of infertility, persistent resistance to formal adoption, and the concomitant quest for a biological child created a demand for baby trafficking through “baby factories.” Unlike formal institutions of adoption which have principles of protection and care, the “baby factory” business is anchored on gender abuse and exploitation. The exploitative nature of this illegal business constitutes a threat to the future wellbeing of women in Nigeria and to the Nigerian society.

It can therefore be argued that the development of “baby factories” in southern Nigeria portrays the increasing vulnerability of women and the fluid nature of gender exploitation in the 21st century. It reveals a shift from the protection of babies and vulnerable pregnant women to an overwhelming abuse and exploitation of women. The paper submits that the phenomenon of “baby factories” as a new trend has not only engineered a new type of exploitation of women in the 21st century Nigeria, its implications point to a bleak future for Nigeria, and especially for those women who are being used like industrial machines in the “baby factories.”

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