

Chapter 15

House Girls and House Boys  
*Domestic Servitude in Southern  
Nigeria, 1940–2020*

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From the mid-twentieth century to today, the process by which children engage in domestic labor as house girls and boys in Nigeria has depended on the family’s prevailing circumstances with poverty as the main reason to surrender children to domestic servanthood. Highlighting a perceived difference in past and present practices, Marie-Antoinette Sossou and Joseph A. Yogtiba claim that “children are no longer being fostered out to kinsmen as a gesture of family good will [as was done in the past], but it has become an economic venture in which children are traded as commodities for money through middlemen to faraway destinations unknown to both parents and children” where they suffer “multiple abuses and neglect.”<sup>1</sup> Abosede Omowumi Babatunde asserts that when parents offer their children as domestic servants they are more likely to be trafficked today.<sup>2</sup> In assessing the validity of these arguments, this chapter explores 1940s and 1950s newspaper reports, colonial archival materials, contemporary media reports of child domestic servant abuses, a dozen interviews conducted with Nigerian elders, men and women in Enugu, Owerri and Calabar, Nigeria, in 2012, wherein the respondents explained how custodians acquired and treated house girls and house boys. In this light, I offer a reexamination of the attention paid to child laborers in domestic spheres, historically and in the current era, with an emphasis on personal relationships, expectations between the parents and the recipient of the child, a house child’s ability to enact forms of agency, and offer a consideration of *embedded subordinate class consciousness*.

Individuals who take children into their care for the purpose of performing housework and other duties act on their own inclinations and treat children however they please and this unchecked power has led to child abuse in the

domestic sphere. The Nigerian Child Rights Act of 2003 addressed prevailing criticisms of child abuse by stating, “A child shall be given such protection and care as is necessary for the well-being of the child, taking into account the rights and duties of the child’s parents, legal guardians, or other individuals, institutions, services, agencies, organizations or bodies legally responsible for the child.”<sup>3</sup> The Act also made holding a child in servitude a crime. The Act, however, allowed for child labor employed “by a member of his family on light work of an agricultural, horticultural or domestic character.”<sup>4</sup> The phrase “light work,” is open to interpretation and the manner by which children are informally transferred from one household to another, lacks oversight. Thus, the prevalence of forced child labor and abuse has drawn international attention globally.

The United Nations International Labor Office (ILO) estimates that one in four modern-day slaves are children.<sup>5</sup> The ILO describes modern-day slavery as an institution that “is not defined in law, [but] it is used as an umbrella term that focuses attention on commonalities across these legal concepts. Essentially, it refers to situations of exploitation that a person cannot refuse or leave because of threats, violence, coercion, deception, and/or abuse of power.”<sup>6</sup> According to the parameters above, child domestic laborers who are disallowed from returning home fall in the modern-day slave category, especially when they suffer abuse and are not paid for their services. In 2017, the ILO reports that 71 percent of females are victimized compared to 29 percent of males and that girls are “disproportionately victimized above all for forced labor in the private economy (including domestic work and the sex industry) and forced marriage.”<sup>7</sup>

A domestic servant is defined as a person who “does domestic work in someone else’s house for pay or in-kind enumeration”; the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child defines a child as “someone who is under the age of eighteen”; and the ILO defines child labor as “work that deprives children of their childhood, their potential and their dignity, and that is harmful to physical and mental development.”<sup>8</sup> Anti-human trafficking activists seek an end to involuntary child domestic labor where a nonbiological child is placed in a home where mental and physical violence is prevalent and the child is prevented from attending school.<sup>9</sup> Though there is abundant attention afforded to publicized child abuse cases, scholars have acknowledged that the prevalence of child domestic servitude is obscured due to the nature and location of the work performed.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, when a child is placed in domestic servitude, it is not always a result of child trafficking or an instance modern-day slavery. Thus, negative claims about child domestic servants should be problematized. Human Rights specialist Annie Bunting and contemporary slavery expert Joel Quirk argue that “this global cause can best be understood as an unstable amalgamation of

a wide range of diverse practices that go well beyond the legal definitions and historical experiences of slavery.”<sup>11</sup> As such, this study focuses on the historical trajectory of domestic servitude in Nigeria and seeks to answer the question, has child domestic servitude changed over time?

Much of the current scholarship on domestic labor is focused on the expansion of capitalism, growing class divides, migrant labor, and sexual exploitation with some attention to parentless and/or indigent children in need of care.<sup>12</sup> This examination is important because it challenges the assumption that there is a linear historical trajectory through which patterns of placing children into domestic servanthood has transformed from a safe practice during the 1940s and 1950s to a much more vulnerable process subjecting children in greater numbers to trafficking in the contemporary era. I argue that the quality of the interpersonal relationship between the parent and the receiving guardian dictate the treatment of the child.

## MEDIA ATTENTION AND ABUSE

In 2020, State Criminal Investigation and Intelligence Department operatives arrested Franc Ifedili and Ifunnanya Ifedili after the police received a petition from the human rights organization, Paths of Peace Initiatives, about the inhumane treatment suffered by the victim. The organization charges that the couple were “in the habit of bringing minors from villages to act as house boys and girls, subjecting them to all sorts of child abuse including corporal punishments and others.” In reference to Nmeso, a 9-year-old whom they brought to live and work as a house girl, it became evident that “she was subjected to all sorts of inhuman maltreatment including daily flogging (by horsewhip).” When Nmeso fled, the Ifedilis brought another minor, Chidera, a 9-year-old boy whom they have subjected to flogging and other similar treatment suffered by Nmeso. As recent as June 2020, the Lagos State Police continued to investigate the couple for allegedly abusing Chidera.<sup>13</sup> Stories such as this have prompted celebrities and others to publicly admonish those who employ child domestic servants.

In 2017, Nigerian rapper, Lanre Dabiri petitioned Nigerians to discontinue using house children. He tweeted that, “Those house-helps from Benin/Togo whose masters get paid 10k every month to do chores from dusk till dawn. I’m talking about the ones you kick and scream at all day to do your house chores, watch your kids, do your laundry, dishes, cook, etc. The ones you pay less than \$50 a month to the man/woman who brought him/her from Benin/Calabar/Akwa Ibom/Togo. Yes, that is also #Slavery.”<sup>14</sup> Dabiri is clearly addressing the delivery of house children who have arrived through child trafficking channels. His condemnation of the emotional and physical abuse

endured by children is directly related to the separation between the child and his or her biological parents. It is unmistakable that some trafficked children have no recourse and are not protected by their ability to return home. In the case of children whose parents or family members know their whereabouts, their family is complicit by accepting a one-time payment or installments for their service and are inclined to leave children in service.

Unfortunately, the widely known mistreatment of some house children does not automatically persuade biological parents or other family members to redeem them. Abi Daré, author of *The Girl with the Louding Voice*, a novel about a house girl in Nigeria explains “A large proportion of these children are young girls, who work as ‘house girls’: domestic servants who are often underage and forced against their will into this kind of work. Many of them never see their ‘wages’, as they are paid directly to agents or family members.”<sup>15</sup> Daré notes that “identifying a house girl is easy because many of them had unkempt hair and were dressed in tattered, dirty clothes. They would stand behind a family of well-dressed, well-fed, well-spoken children, their heads bent, silent.”<sup>16</sup> Daré reminds her readers that “in Nigeria, many of these house girls have no power, no voice of their own. In their silence, many of them suffered horrific physical and sexual abuse. There have been numerous reports of house girls being routinely raped, starved, beaten and disfigured by the families that employ them.”<sup>17</sup> Current day abuses and Daré’s description of the demeanor of house children speaks volumes about the child’s shame and what I describe as *embedded subordinate class consciousness* that is experienced as a result of mistreatment. The child is embedded in someone else’s family, generally a home that has more resources than the child’s parents, and through the abuse of the child, the child develops an awareness of his or her subordinate position within the family—the child is both remanded to the home physically yet excluded from the home emotionally. Hence, “house child” belonging to the home not the family. But the question remains: Are child domestic servants worse off now than in the colonial era? It is worth analyzing change over time and reform efforts that aimed to stop the exploitation of child servants.

## CHILD DOMESTIC SERVANTS DURING THE COLONIAL ERA

On June 16, 1949, the British colonial government published a public notice in the *Gazette Supplement* that outlined the “conditions of employment for domestic servants.” The Labour Advisory Board crafted the notice as a guide but opted not to “enforce it by proper legislation.” The recommendation addressed matters relating to holidays, sick leave,

termination of service, and suitable working hours. They also suggested minimum monthly wages “where the employer provides neither lodging nor food.” Suggested Monthly Wages included, “Cook £3, Steward £3, Small Boy £2, Garden Boy £2, Nursemaid £2.10s,” and a “Car driver £3.15s.” If the child or adult lived with the employer, the Board suggested a £1 decrease of the monthly wages.<sup>18</sup> In some instances “house boy” referred to an adult man who performed domestic duties, exposing a form of emasculation of African adults during the colonial era, but the examples in this study pertain to children.<sup>19</sup> The notice defined a small boy as “a worker wholly or mainly engaged in cleaning of floors and windows, kitchens and pantries, the washing of dishes and kitchen utensils, or on duties ancillary to any of these duties, and is directly under the supervision of a steward, where on is employed.”<sup>20</sup> Chief Ugwuefi Reuben explained that during the 1940s and 1950s house girls ran errands, cooked, cleaned, hawked items for sale, and worked on the farm.<sup>21</sup> In some instances girls were also placed into sex work.

Parents established various practices when releasing children into domestic service and it is well documented that some parents in southeastern Nigeria sent their children to Lagos (southwestern Nigeria) to work as servants after which the girls ended up as prostitutes.<sup>22</sup> In 1945, *The Nigerian Eastern Mail* reported that “Still the number of very young girls engaged in prostitution is painfully large and most of them are being exploited by their mistresses. . . . Some mothers hawk their young daughters and others give them to mistresses on some arrangement for sharing the profits.”<sup>23</sup> The Christian Lagosian community did not approve and reasoned that sex work was akin to domestic violence, and that kind of violence harmed the individual and was a scourge on society allowing some children who suffered abuse access to methods of redress, including reporting abuses to police and the Juvenile Court system and in such instances the Juvenile Court intervened.<sup>24</sup>

Children who sought intervention testified about the violence leveled against them. In 1952, Atie Bob Manual, a Lagos Social Welfare Officer, reported that two girls, Affiong Okon, age 8, and Ekanem Jonah, age 14, had suffered abuse at the hands of their mistress.

[An] investigation revealed that Sarah Henshaw, clerk at P.W.D. brought them to Lagos and had employed them as maidservants without payment. In fact, she claims that they are her property as their mothers were bought by her own mother. Sarah had been extremely cruel to the girls; she cut them with matchet whenever they failed to give her satisfactory service. She was prosecuted for assaulting Affiong and wounding her head. Sara is a common prostitute and entertains several men in her home.

There are two issues at play in the testimony above. The first involves the complicit actions by the children's mother in giving out the children. The second has to do with the types of abuse suffered by the child, the social dynamic of "othering" that separates the child's guardian from becoming emotionally attached to the child and permits the continuation of child abuse. Fred Powell and Margaret Scanlon assert that "'othering' follows the classic lines of class, gender, ethnicity, disability, sexuality and age. It places 'us' above 'them'. In relation to children, age is of pivotal importance since it legitimates adult power over children's lives, including the formation of identity, concept of self and social and economic opportunities."<sup>25</sup> Reinforcing the idea that mistresses "othered" child servants, she treated the children with no more care than an animal would receive.

Violence against children became such a serious issue that newspapers began to print opinion pieces addressing abusive mistresses' tendencies. Statements in *The Nigerian Eastern Mail* included, "Time and time again a poor father or mother has been seen in the Police Office with tears running down the cheeks narrating the sad story of the loss of his or her son or daughters,"<sup>26</sup> and "Again, parents should have the sense not to give their sons or daughters to unknown people."<sup>27</sup> In another published statement in 1946, one author asked African ladies and housewives to treat "house boys not only as human beings but as they would like to be treated." The author claimed that house boys preferred working for bachelors because as the "strictest disciplinarians," women exploited them and abused them ruthlessly. He explained that,

[m]ost often than not the poor feeding of the boys . . . has never been sanctioned by the breadwinner, but the trouble is that their wives will never tolerate their domestic business being interfered with. Half of the number of domestic squabbles resulting at times to some beautiful faces being bruised arises from divergence of opinion between husbands and wives regarding the well-being and welfare of house boys.<sup>28</sup>

The author goes on to lament that "the plight of house boys is more pitiable, especially in homes where there are children. The children are indulged in all sorts of luxuries, but the house boy whose main job is to take care of these children may receive no more than that of a serf." A point of contention was that often families who employed house boys applied and received ration cards from the Government Food Registrar but failed to feed the house child sufficiently—another instance of "othering" at play.

In addition to abuse inside of the home, women involved in petty trade activities forced children, mainly boys to guard their market stall goods overnight. As I have written elsewhere, this was a common occurrence that ended

in mishap and death at times.<sup>29</sup> Attention from the Social Welfare Office and the Calabar District Magistrate noticed the appearance of these poorly clothed and underfed house boys.<sup>30</sup> In January 1945, *The Nigerian Eastern Mail* observed that “quite a number of young children were discovered in the market stalls at night locked in there all alone in the darkness by their masters with hardly sufficient sleeping space among their masters’ wares and the keys taken away till the next morning.”<sup>31</sup> By November 1947, an address given by the Calabar Juvenile Welfare Committee denounced the practice of house boys who “slept in the market stalls of their trading mistresses where they had to steal eating from dust-bins.”<sup>32</sup> In criticism of children roaming Calabar’s streets every night, Social Welfare Officer Mr. Skeates acknowledged that “all the children found wandering stated that they had been given to so-called relatives and so-called masters to train and educate.”<sup>33</sup> However, evidence shows that most children “found wandering” did not received that which was promised.

Attention to the exploitation and abuse of children sought to eliminate not only the abuse, but the activities deemed delinquent by society.<sup>34</sup> It was the moral obligation of nonbiological guardians to train the child properly without putting the child into “moral danger” letting them out all hours of the night.<sup>35</sup> If parents expected the guardian to care for the child properly by feeding them sufficiently, educating and protecting them child from delinquent behaviors, it is worth examining how and why parents placed children with other families.

### The Process of Placing House Children: Then and Now

As an extremely personal act, the placement of children in homes as domestic servants, can generally be understood as a mutually beneficial act for the parents and the new guardians. It was common to place an ad in a local newspaper for those in need of domestic servants, especially when they did not have a family member who willing offered a child to work as a domestic servant.<sup>36</sup> As previously mentioned, poverty remains the main reason children are handed over to nonbiological guardians. When asked how Nigerians acquired house children, respondents provided an assortment of examples from the past and present. Chief Ugwuefi Reuben, resident of Enugu, Nigeria, confirmed that the lack of money led to lending out one’s child, some of whom he has taken in over the years. He said, “Yes, they do it. It may be that the person’s husband is not alive. Secondly, it may be one of poverty that makes them send some of their children to me out of need to feed them or to educate them in school.”<sup>37</sup> In another example, the HRH Igwe Dr. Titus Okolo JP King of Amorji-Nike describes the process in Enugu, one that has generally remained the same from the 1940s until the date of his interview in



2012. He explained that indigent parents often approached wealthier members of their family or the community and offered their child to the person. In other instances, they might tell the parents of a child that they are looking for a house girl or house boy. Enacted as a measure of care, “some brothers and sisters who want to help their brothers and sisters,” by taking in poor children because “people are fighting over food.” In his experience, he told the parents “give me two of them and I will train them.”<sup>38</sup>

While some placed their children with strangers, many Nigerian parents refused to place their child with someone who was not a close friend or family member. Elder Abraham Okolo insisted that “They are always a relation. They bring a relation to live with you to help them. It wasn’t a stranger . . . it must be a relation.”<sup>39</sup> An elder from Ibeagwa Nike, Enugu Chief Ugwu Nwangwo Ugwu, explained, “You call your relation [or] your relations call you and you will be serving them. To please your master you have to be holding the plates” and serving them.<sup>40</sup> In the case of Ahanotu Marcellenus of Mbaitoli, Imo State, he claimed that the house boys are generally “the child of a family friend.”<sup>41</sup> And in an instance where the mother needed assistance from a family member, Harrieth Isiokpe of Calabar explained that she “had no money to train a child and my uncle helped me out” by taking her child in.<sup>42</sup> HRH Dr. Tony Ojukwu Igwe described the process of gaining a child when a family did not have any children or “enough” children to help out with household chores. The receiving guardian would “treat them as he treats his children” and that “everything is mutual agreement, relationship.” Describing the cultural process of the exchange, Igwe noted that if two people were especially good friends, the parent would instruct the daughter to fetch some water, and when the daughter returned with the water, the parent would say, “Take this girl, I give his daughter willingly, voluntarily. She will help you with hot water in the morning.”<sup>43</sup> This description emphasizes the usefulness of child labor within a home where adults needed assistance and the emphasis on “willingly,” and “voluntarily” is significant because it underscores that the child is not being taken as a slave.

Parents and custodians always came to an agreement before the child was transferred to ensure the safety of the child and in some agreements to decide on the enumeration for the child’s labor. Grace I. Obi of Owerri described the process of selecting a house: “If they agree, we will discuss terms. In some cases, they demand I should be paying them a specific amount monthly; while some parents will demand I should train their children in school while he/she lives with me. The agreement was never defaulted once reached.”<sup>44</sup> In another arrangement, Chief Reuben stated: “I negotiated with the mother-with the parents of the person. Inviting them into my compound. It is the duty of my wife who has negotiated. After the negotiation, then I will agree with her. Inviting the maid will help her more in domestic work, washing clothes and tending to



my farm. As we treat our own child is the way the maid is treated.”<sup>45</sup> In the following cases, those seeking house help approached family members and there was no mention of payment during the exchange. The first example is that of Nelson Anyanele Ezeji of Owerri who said, “In my own case, the child I live with is my in-law, though a house girl, but we are related.”<sup>46</sup> The second is that of Anthonia Nkechinyere Ibeawuchi of Owerri, where by taking the girl she was assisting her brother by providing for the child and explained that “She is my niece and she was asked to stay with me by my brother (the father).”<sup>47</sup> Taking the children was an act of charity extended to family members.

### **Renumeration, Treatment, and Expectations of House Children**

Interview respondents to this study had several examples of how they “paid” for a house child’s service and the treatment afforded to the child. Comments included: “I pay for their school fees”; “I will give her [the mother] money for transport”; and “I give them welfare for the child, but no money.”<sup>48</sup> Ahanotu Marcellenus, “(Laughs) As a matter of fact, he is more like a grandson to me. Unless you are told, you won’t notice he is not my biological child. He goes to school. We hold education high in my family and that extends to everyone under my roof.”<sup>49</sup> Nelson A. Ezeji, Anthonia N. Ibeawuchi, Grace I. Obi, and HRH Igwe Dr. Titus Okolo JP King of Amoriji also claimed that they sent their house children to school and that house girls are treated equally to their own children.<sup>50</sup> Elder Chief Ugwu Nwangwo Ugwu made the distinction between decent guardians and those who would act otherwise, “A good person will treat the house girl or house boy equally. The child will be regarding them as their parents.”<sup>51</sup>

Parents had certain expectations as it is related to the treatment of a child placed in service, but contemporary accounts, historical newspaper reports, and archival materials show that children often suffered maltreatment. The treatment of house children depended on the on the master’s temperament. Tony Ojukwu Igwe explained that generally the guardian “was likely to treat the child like his own children but you cannot rule out discrimination. [You] approach the parent and tell him exactly what you want. You must make sure that you know the person so your child will be safe because others are rough handed with children and will do anything you can ever think of.” He went on to say that if you are the person who wants a child, “you must be able to convince the person that you will take care of the child.” In another example, Nelson A. Ezeji claimed that his house girl is treated similar to his biological children and goes to school.<sup>52</sup>

Receiving a house child meant introducing a new personality, temperament, and cultural practices. In some cases, house children “were climatized,

[and] custodians assess [their] character before they can go outside compounds, to fetch water, before they can make friends. [There were] walls so high kids could not scale. No communication between children and parents. Parents lost control even before giving them out.”<sup>53</sup> One cannot undervalue the importance of ensuring that house children behaved morally and respectfully. In reference to her work on the Tuareg, Susan Rasmussen explains that “constructing moral personhood” involved adults giving children and other adults in close proximity to the family “small moral tests” to ensure the virtuous character of the person.<sup>54</sup> “If they are disobedient, you return him early. If he is stubborn, you will return him earlier.”<sup>55</sup> Guardians did not want to risk the shame of housing an ill-tempered or troublesome child. However, the desire to have a well-mannered and obedient child did not mean the child was always treated with kindness or dignity. Concerns about misbehaving house children remained a constant from the 1950s to the contemporary period.

The example given in a 1950s newspaper is one that highlights the physical abuse endured by house servants and the possible recourse for such actions. The article states that one Okomba Ikpe was “charged with assaulting one Ndukwe Aja, the accused’s house-boy,” in the Calabar Magistrate’s Court. The judge, Mr. S. O. Lambo, decided that as a consequence of inflicting a “serious” head wound on house boy, Okomba Ikpe, he would be “sentenced to a fine of £15” or two months in jail,” and “pay the sum of £5 to the complainant or in default serve [an] additional one month.”<sup>56</sup> Chief Ugwuefi Reuben, an Enugu resident in the Southeast, explained that mistreating house servants was not unusual and that they “would be treated harshly,” and “would not be given a chance to move away” in the past.<sup>57</sup> Determined to keep them in service, masters and mistresses prevented children from returning home.

In other cases, acts of domestic violence occurred between fellow servants and assaults levied by servants upon masters. I ascribe the term deliberately because workplace abuse is “domesticized,” when it occurs in the privacy of the home.<sup>58</sup> Domestic violence in this context can occur between the house servant and anyone else in the home. For example, in 1946, British Social Welfare Officer Mr. Skeates reported that “a fourteen-year-old who wounded a fellow servant under the same master on the left wrist with an axe while they struggled at night over a sleeping mat was found guilty and sentenced to 12 strokes of the cane with an order to be mandated to the reformatory here for two months.”<sup>59</sup>

When the living environment offered meager food and accommodations, it is not surprising that house boys fought over what few resources were available. In one attack, one “Okereke Utere was charged with assaulting a lady, Agnes Thomas and calling her a harlot.”<sup>60</sup> Okereke’s attack upon his mistress likely stemmed from ongoing abuse and the inability to return home. In an effort to acquire money another 14-year-old boy servant stole “4 yards of

shirting, 1 bicycle bell, 1 bicycle lock, one pair of lady's shoes, a fan . . .” and asked a friend to sell the items on his behalf. However, when he was caught, he was punished with twelve strokes.<sup>61</sup> Some children experienced such severe abuse they exerted their final act of agency by running away as recalled in the example of one 7-year-old boy who “escaped from his master's house when he was sent on an errand. The boy could not keep pace with the marketers whom he followed and was later left alone on the track at the mercy of wild beasts and highway men.”<sup>62</sup>

A child who is not in a home of her/his own is exposed to an environment that lacks the assumed physical and mental protections of biological parents (of course there are exceptions). Jonathan Blagbrough highlights this point by claiming that “child domestic workers are vulnerable to abuse and exploitations not only because they are children and predominantly female but also because they are workers in people's homes.”<sup>63</sup> Abuse is likely to occur and go unabated in the private sphere of the household. In her early twentieth study on Chinese brokers who trafficked in women and children, Johanna Ransmeier explains that the market for people engendered “gradations of influence, intimate knowledge, and conspiracy,” which shapes the “transfer of people between domestic spheres.”<sup>64</sup> Moreover, the domestic servant is often rendered invisible because of cultural norms that encourage biological children of the household to ignore the presence of the servants working for them.<sup>65</sup> The disdain for house servants also indicates the class consciousness developed by the biological children within the home. A 1951 newspaper story reported that “There are thousands of schoolboys and girls who are not willing to help their parents. These school children consider it too low for them to help in the kitchen, in the cleaning of the house, and in other duties in the house.” “Simply because they are able to read and write a little, they think they are to help those who feed, clothe and care for them. They wrongly think that it is the servants . . . that should do the work.”<sup>66</sup> In addition to the prejudice held by biological children against the child servants, adults also participated in injurious actions against the nonbiological children.

Taking into consideration sexual assault cases and other forms of abuse endured by boys and girls, it is essential that consideration is given to the current status of domestic servants in Nigeria. One of the most traumatic experiences for house girls is that of sexual abuse, especially when she is forced to remain with the abusive family. Numerous sexual assault cases go unreported globally, especially when the incident involves young children.<sup>67</sup> A study that examined documented alleged sexual assault cases in Lagos, Nigeria, at the Lagos State University Teaching Hospital underscored that of the 287 cases (out of 304) reported between 2008 and 2012, girls under the age of 19 years old made up 83.6 percent of all incidents reported, 4.2 percent of whom worked as domestic servants.<sup>68</sup>

House girls endured rape, forced sex trafficking, and marriage without the normative bride price payments owed to her parents when placed in service. Chief Ugwuefi Reuben described instances where the husband raped a house girl; some wives would retaliate by abandoning the husband and instructing him to marry the girl.<sup>69</sup> However, sex between a master and young domestic servant is not always derided by certain societies as rape. In her study of child servants in the late Ottoman Empire, Nazan Maksudyan argues that the job description for *beslemes*, indigent girls informally adopted by others “included a de facto form of unregulated concubinage, since their dependent and vulnerable position made them easy prey for the molestations of their masters.”<sup>70</sup> We see this to be true in the reported prevalence by other interview responses, which unveil current trends: “Children are used for rituals and those children never turn good, some do prostitution”;<sup>71</sup> “It is an unpleasant shock to the community conscious to realize that sexual assaults upon children are becoming so prevalent in the community as to construe what amounts to be a social malady”; and “that a criminal who lusts after girl children of five and six years old is as dangerous to the community as a wild beast.”<sup>72</sup> It is apparent that child trafficking, sexual assault and other abuses levied against children have prevailed over the past eighty years, but in most cases, regardless of the historical era the quality of the relationship between the parent and the recipient guardian determined the child’s treatment.

## CONCLUSION

To describe adults, during the colonial era or those in contemporary society, who abuse child domestic servants as “wild beasts” may be appropriate, but such criticisms do not serve the needs of children suffering various forms of violence within domestic servitude. The negative treatment suffered by child domestic servants is not limited to those identified above. The lack of access to education, isolation, “lowering of self-esteem,” and “emotional stress” are also damaging outcomes.<sup>73</sup> Combine these consequences with instances where a child has been trafficked away from biological parents or other kin members and is left largely to rely on him or herself. And for these reasons, Nigerians blame the government for not taking a more aggressive approach to end instances of child trafficking and involuntary domestic servitude today.<sup>74</sup>

Though the majority of the participants in this study indicated that house children during the contemporary era receive similar housing, education, and treatment as their own biological treatment, it is clear that the movement of children from one home to another increases their social and physical vulnerability. Therefore, it is understandable that this phenomenon coupled

with the fact that many non-kin members are in receipt of such children, that children's movement can then be deemed child trafficking. However, others take a more academic approach to child labor. Some believe that African children are uniquely "resilient and capable of overcoming the most difficult conditions to become successful."<sup>75</sup> Sociologist Michael Bourdillon argues that there are "fundamental benefits of work in child development—how it contributes to developing non-cognitive skills and to changing social relations as the young person becomes integrated into society."<sup>76</sup> This may be true, but it is critical that we recognize that some forms of trafficking and abuse should never be endured.

As scholars, practitioners, and employers tout the efficacy and learning possibilities for children who work in various environments, let us remember the pitfalls that exist when children are used and abused in nefarious ways. Whether it be the child who in 1953 suffered a severe head wound by his master or the story of a 12-year-old boy, born in Benin, and trafficked to Nigeria where his mistress "inflicted series of injuries on him with a razor blade and poured hot water on him in 2014."<sup>77</sup> Methods of circulating children to alleviate poverty and the need for assistance within the home can result in some good for the child; however, the continued acceptability of abusive practices can hide the true nature of such arrangements across time, especially when the biological parents and receiving guardians lack a close interpersonal relationship.

## NOTES

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