

PERCEPTION OF MAIDS AND NANNIES AS “NECESSARY EVILS” BY BAYERO UNIVERSITY KANO FEMALE STUDENTS’ EMPLOYERS

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Abstract

This paper explores the views of Bayero University Kano female students’ employers toward maids and nannies – girls aged 8 to 15 – who they engage to help them care for their children and in the performance of some household chores. Without the services of these maids and nannies, many such students may be constrained to pursue their education and career. The women employers are privileged, high status individuals; the maids and nannies, on the other hand, are poor and drawn mainly from rural areas, compelled to take up such employment to help put food on the table for their families. Interviews with the respondents (the employers of the maids and nannies) revealed that despite sorely needing the services of the maids and nannies, they have a poor perception of them, they are “a necessary evil.” The irony of the fact that the maids and nannies are children who risk physical and emotional hazards, in addition to being deprived of the opportunity to pursue education is lost on their employers and the larger society that turned a blind eye to it. In other words, as long as the conditions that propel young children to seek jobs as domestic workers persist, and for as long as there are no alternatives for the privileged urban-based woman, child domestic work will continue. The paper recommends that child employment and compulsory education legislations be enforced in addition to the provision of crèche facilities at tertiary institutions and work places, where none exists, as a panacea to the problem.

Keywords: Child labour; Domestic workers; Female employers; Maids; Nannies

Introduction

One of the disturbing statistics coming out of Nigeria is the reported high number of children that are not enrolled in school. According to the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2019) one in every five of the world's out-of-school children is in Nigeria even though the Nigerian constitution makes it not only free but compulsory for all children to attend primary school. Theoretically, therefore, there was no reason why any of Nigeria's children should be out of school. While it is accepted that the future of Nigeria like it is with all other nations lies and is intimately tied to the present status of its children, it should certainly be a source of worry when it is realized that as many as 10.5 million of its children aged between 5 -14 years are not in school (UNICEF, 2019). Equally worrisome is the destination of these children: If they are not in school, where are they?

This paper has its impetus in the observation around Bayero University campus of young children, all of them girls, of school age, tending to babies and toddlers, serving as nannies and maids, as the mothers of those babies and toddlers attend classes. These children that roam the campus with babies strapped to their backs must obviously be part of those millions of out-of-school Nigerian children. The student-employers of the maids should also have a story to tell about their employees and what purposes such employment serves. If they must employ maids and nannies, why must they employ children?

To the extent that these maids and nannies are children, this study falls within the purview of research into child labour and the consequences it has for the child, her future and that of the nation where such potentially useful segment of the population is left out-of-school and uneducated. The paper therefore, discusses issues related to child labour before returning to the questions raised above.

Child Labour

Scholars have addressed the issue of child labour seeking to distinguish between "work that profits children and work that brings profit only to the employer" (Hine, 1908). Child labour refers to the employment of children in any work that deprives them of their childhood, interferes with their ability to attend regular school, and that is mentally, physically, socially or morally dangerous and harmful (International Labour Organization, ILO, 2015). The Convention on the Rights of the Child which was adopted and opened for signature, ratification and accession by the General Assembly resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989 provides under Article 6 that:

- (1) States Parties recognize that every child has the inherent right to life, and, (2) States Parties shall ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of the child.
- (2) With regards to education, Article 28 states that: States Parties recognize the right of the child to education, and with a view to achieving this right progressively and on the basis of equal opportunity, they shall, in particular:
 - i. Make primary education compulsory and available free to all;
 - ii. Encourage the development of different forms of secondary education, including general and vocational education, make them available and accessible to every child, and take appropriate measures such as the introduction of free education and offering financial assistance in case of need;

Countries, including Nigeria, have, in addition to international laws and conventions, local laws that seek to further entrench the rights of the child to safety, security, education, and wellbeing among others. As a complement to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, CRC, the Nigeria Labour Act details what types and nature of labour the child and young person should be engaged in. It provides:

- 1) No child shall-**
 - i. Be employed or work in any capacity except where he is employed by a member of his family on light work of an agricultural, horticultural or domestic character approved by the Minister; or
 - ii. Be required in any case to lift, carry or move anything so heavy as to be likely to injure his physical development.
- 2) A young person under the age of fourteen years may be employed only-**
 - i. On a daily wage;
 - ii. On a day-to-day basis; and
 - iii. So long as he returns each night to the place of residence of his parents or guardian or a person approved by his parents or guardian.
- 3) No young person under the age of sixteen years shall be employed in circumstances in which it is not reasonably possible for him to return each day to the place of residence of his parent or guardian except-**
 - i. With the approval of an authorized labour officer.
- (4) No young person under the age of sixteen years shall be employed-**
 - i. To work underground; or
 - ii. On machine work; or
 - iii. On a public holiday.

However, despite the foregoing legislations and conventions, it is not in doubt that not all work that is done by children is considered child labour. Any work that children do that is not harmful to their mental and physical development is generally regarded as positive, it may even be a necessary part of their socialization and development. Some labour may not only put money into the pockets of the children, it may expose them to necessary life survival skills such as savings and investment decisions. These kinds of activities contribute to children's development and to the welfare of their families; they provide them with skills and experience, and help to prepare them to be productive members of society during their adult life.

Objectives of the study

The objectives of the study are to:

- i. To determine the characteristics of the employers of the maids and nannies.
- ii. To ascertain the perception of the employers of maids and nannies they employ and the work that they do for them.

Significance of the Study

In many countries, maids and nannies are hired for baby-sitting and general housekeeping including cooking, washing, cleaning and other incidental work around the home (Rollins, 1985). Some maids are also known to play additional roles, including taking children to and from school, as well as minding the house while the owner is out to work or otherwise engaged. In developing countries like Nigeria, where working mothers may have no access to day care facilities for their children at the work place, the maid fills in the void. A maid or nanny not only provides service to the needy persons of the society but also, for many a woman of child-bearing age, not accessing such service may jeopardize her participation in the formal workforce or her quest for education. The present study will provide an insight into this underexplored area of domestic service from the perspective of the employer.

Literature Review

Women and men have been analyzed in terms of the work that they do on account of their gender difference. Although division of labour may seem natural, scholars say it is not a neutral process. Acker (1989), points out that due to gender hierarchies, skewed and manipulated to favour men, women are paid less even when they do comparable jobs.

Certain occupations and jobs were also elevated and preferred once they carry the toga “men’s work” and those levied “women’s work” are demeaned (Kessler-Harris, 1981).

Hartmann (1976), blame women’s lowly position in the labour market on the combined effects of capitalism and patriarchy. As a consequence of differential gender treatment, as well as social and historical circumstances, women the world over, have experienced marginalization and discrimination in all spheres, including access to education and jobs. The work that they do, even that which they are biologically equipped to do – such as child bearing, are not accorded the prestige and recognition it deserves. Chores that they do around the house are unremunerated on account of their being regarded as part of the housewife’s duties.

Women only began to join the formal labour force out of necessity when men went to the war fronts and there was shortage of labour to run the factories. Such work was considered an interim one, since on the return of the men from the war fronts, the women were expected to return to their house chores. Expanding production and changing opinions, and the fact that women were doing jobs at a fraction of what men were being paid meant that women never went back to the kitchen. They stayed, but as unequal partners.

In the case of colonial countries, the hierarchy of privileges put the woman of the colonies much lower, below the black man, who is subordinated to the colonial occupiers. Karimi (2010) talking of Kenya said:

Historically, paid domestic labor originated in the colonial period. As in all patriarchal societies, there existed in Kenya a marked division of labor across gender lines. It is interesting to note that domestic labor in colonial Kenya was mainly the purview of men. It was the male members of the family who left their own homes, mostly in the rural areas, to work in white households as a means of earning a livelihood (p.152).

As particular jobs and occupations are abandoned by men, women move in and take over. The post-independence period saw the feminization of domestic labor in Kenya, with more women joining the workforce and gradually constituting the larger percentage of domestic workers (Karimi 2010). The more educated and affluent, who stepped into the shoes of the former colonialists, employed their rural folk in domestic labour, especially girls, in large numbers into this sector.

Moser (2014, 1993), has developed and refined a framework which has been found useful in not only understanding the “triple bind” in which women are held, the framework she developed has helped to design strategies to get women out of the shackle. “Gender

roles” and “gender needs” was responsible for why educated working women hire and make use of domestic labour. In most societies Moser (1993), argues, must fulfill three main roles:

- i. **Reproductive:** This refers not only to women's childbearing role, but also their child rearing one. Women engage in various activities that ensure the maintenance and reproduction of the labour forces
- ii. **Productive:** This refers to the women's role as income earners (often in agriculture or the informal sector). Though they are often secondary income earners, there are many cases when they are the sole income earner (such as in female headed households)
- iii. **Community:** This refers to women's collective work at the community level.

Women have to balance these three roles, whereas men generally only have a productive role (though they may be involved in "community politics" where they organize at the formal political level).

Gender Needs

It is the fulfillment of these "gender roles" that determines people's "gender needs". Such needs can be further broken down into "practical gender needs" and "strategic gender needs" (Moser, 1996).

- i. **Practical Gender Needs:** Practical gender needs refer those needs of men and women as defined by their existing engendered roles within society, in which, as mentioned, women must fulfill three roles while men usually fulfill one. Practical needs and practical policies are concerned with the effective fulfillment of these socially defined roles; that is, they do not seek to change the status quo.
- ii. **Strategic Gender Needs:** In contrast, strategic needs and strategic policies are directly concerned with changing the status quo: challenging socially defined roles and tackling gender subordination in society.

Methods

This study surveyed Bayero University students that come to school with their maids; they are the target population. The impetus for this study was drawn from a discussion in a postgraduate class taught by the researcher. During the course of discussions in the class, some heat was raised regarding the employment of young girls as maids and nannies; tempers were doused and channeled to more productive ends when those for and against the practice were asked to give their reasons for the positions they adopted.

Subsequently, using snowball sampling, 23 respondents were recruited for the study. It is important to note that there are probably ten times this number of students that may have met the criteria for participation, so this number is only of those that were referred and agreed to be part of the research.

For a respondent to fulfill the criteria for inclusion she, in addition to being a student (graduate or undergraduate), must also have a maid that she brings along to the school, and the maid or nanny is below 16 years of age.

All respondents were briefed about the study and their consents sought before being interviewed. The majority of the interviews were conducted in the researcher's office in the presence of respondent's maid, the person or persons that suggested her to the researcher, or both. Inclement weather was one reason why the only two interviews were held outdoors, not inside the researcher's office. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. All identifiers related to the respondents were removed and the names used were not their real names.

Results

Characteristics of employers of nannies and maids

As has been explained, all the respondents are female students at Bayero University where this study was carried out.

Table I shows the age distribution of the respondents:

Table I: Age Distribution of Respondents

Age	Frequency	Percentage
20 – 24	6	26.08
25 – 29	13	56.52
30 – 34	4	17.40
Total	23	100

Data source: Interview with respondents, (2022)

The youngest respondent is aged 20 and the oldest is 34. However, more than 50 percent of the respondents are aged between 25 and 29 years old. About a quarter of the respondents fall within the age band 20 -24, while those in the age range 30 – 34 make up 17 percent. All the respondents are well within their most fecund stage. Again, as one of the criteria of their inclusion was having a baby which made them bring along a maid or nanny to school, it bears no repeating that these respondents are in school, in part, because some of the burden of child care is taken off them by these employees.

Next, we turn to the number of children that the respondents have, where both the actual number was asked, as well as their desired family size.

Table 2: Number of Children of Respondents

Number of Children	Frequency	Percentage
1 Child only	12	52.17
2 Children	10	43.47
3 Children	1	4.34
Total	23	100

Data source: Interview with respondents, (2022)

Only one respondent has 3 children, the majority, 52%, report having only one child, ten others have 2 children, each. All the respondents also gave indication that they have not yet attained their desired family size, 4 children, for the majority, with one aiming for 6. This being the case, the demand for maids and nannies is not likely to abate anytime soon.

Another reason why the respondents will continue to require the services of maids and nannies is because of their employment status – 12 of them hold jobs as teachers or administrators, 1 person works with a bank, while the others are actively searching.

Characteristics of nannies and maids

All the nannies and maids were sighted by the researcher during the study but none of them was formally interviewed as they were not part of the study, only their employers were. Age of the nannies and maids were provided by the respondents relying on one or more sources: the girl, her parents or guardian, or her own estimation based on the child's built and physique. With none of them having a birth certificate, the age of the maids and nannies is taken as given.

Table 3: Age of Maids and Nannies

Age	Frequency	Percentage
8	2	8.69
9	1	4.34
10	4	17.39
11	3	13.04
12	8	34.78
13	3	13.04
14	1	4.34
15	1	4.34
Total	23	100

Data source: Interview with respondents, (2022)

The oldest of the maids is aged 15 and the youngest are aged 8. Thirty-four percent of the maids are aged 12, with the next highest - 17% being those aged 10, followed by 13% for those aged 11 and 13. The significance of the ages is captured in the answers given to the question the respondents were asked regarding what they consider in recruiting maids.

Referring specifically to age, respondents opined thus:

I do not want someone who is too young, certainly not younger than 10. I had one that was young, 7 or so, and she was bedwetting; I sent her back! (Talatu).
You are in a dilemma, if she is too young she may not be able to do some of the things you want, I need someone that is capable. (Aisha).

It is those in the range of seven to nine, that are more reliable and whose stay may be guaranteed. From around age 14 – 15 you are most definitely going to lose your maid, she will be asked to return home to be married off. (Binta).

From the views above, we see the respondents emphasizing at least three things: they recruit maids and nannies that are capable of doing the tasks they were employed to do, certainly not a loafer; stability, rather than high turnover, of maids and nannies – such that the employer does not have to be on edge not sure the maid is going to stay or go, and, lastly, they want an employee that is not herself in need of care. One respondent, however, qualified the age issue this way:

Some of these girls may be young, age-wise, but what they can do will amaze you, don't always be deceived by age (Asabe).

Work ethics of maids and nannies

Employers were divided on the work ethics of the maids and nannies in their service.

Aisha, a respondent was full of accolades for her current nanny:

This girl is dependable and a workaholic, she is always doing one thing or the other around the house. I am the one telling her to go and rest, but she would not.

A similar view was echoed by another respondent:

Even before I wake up, this girl would have been up sweeping, dusting and mopping. My baby is just six months, she handles her just fine. (Safiya).

Hajiya, however, has a harsh view of maids and nannies. In stark contrast to the views of her co-respondents reported above, it is her position that maids and nannies are “a necessary evil”. According to her:

Within a span of 10 months, I changed three. First one was always sleeping as if she had sleeping sickness, the second one kept coming back from errands to say she lost the money. I gave her to buy things, the third one, I sacked because in her second week with me I found some of my items kept hidden in her room. She had no answer as to why they were in her luggage. If that one had stayed longer she

would have stolen us blind. My frank view is that these girls are a necessary evil, if I could do without them, I would. (Hajiya).

Caring for the maids and nannies

Respondents were asked whether, in their own opinion, the maid and nannies in their employment are happy and satisfied with how they are being treated in the house. Without exception, all the respondents scored themselves as fair employers. They point to the fact that they do not abuse the children physically or emotionally, since they consider them like their own:

The girl has been with me six months; I don't ever recall me scolding her. I can't bring myself to abuse her not to talk of beating. I am not the type (Safiya).
'Yar amanah ce (she is trustworthy), if she begins to appear wayward she will be returned by me to her parents (Gaji).

Others also alluded to their generosity to the girls and their parents:

This Ramadan is the third she is spending here. If I had not been good to her and her family she would have since left. (Amina). She eats what we eat, and sleep with my two and a half-year old, I consider them sisters. She is family. (Rabi).

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study are consistent with what exists in the literature regarding the prevalence of child labour in developing countries where weak institutions – legal, political, and social – makes the issue to thrive and fester (Bachman, 2000). The employers of these maids and nannies are privileged while their employees are less so. In fact, the existence of child labour negatively correlates with per capita income, infrastructure development, school enrolment ratio, the position of women in society and female participation in non-agricultural work (Brown, 2002; Edmonds, 2020; NBS, 2022).

It follows from the findings and what is contained in the literature that the features that drive child labour wherever it is found are all too common. The incidence of child labour is partly linked to the level of socio-economic development of an area and partly to the attitude of the parents, employers, and socio-cultural compulsions. To stem child labour, especially the type under study, a holistic overview of the entire social structure has to be undertaken.

There is the need to address the pull-and-push factors, including reasons why educated women pursuing education and career employ young girls as nannies, why parents give out their children for such jobs, and why the girls are not in school, among others.

Conclusion

The study focused on employers of child maids and nannies; those women whose desire to pursue education and or career, while not putting child bearing on hold, makes them to secure the services provided by the maids and nannies. All of the women regard their employees as vital to them and employ strategies to get the best out of them.

Beginning from recruitment, the employers have preference for early teens – since they are more likely to stay in employment longer. Older teens, 15 and 16, are the least preferred on account of the fear that they may be recalled back to the villages to be married off, being considered by their parents as ripe for marriage. Employers also wanted competent, trust worthy and reliable maids and nannies.

Employers rated themselves high when it comes to the way they treat their maids and nannies. Both the scholarly literature and the popular press are replete with the horrors that maids and nannies, as domestic workers, encounter. That the respondents in this study are painting a different picture of themselves should invite further scholarly analysis to compare the reported self-assessment of the employers with that of the employees. In this study only the voices of the employers were heard.

A major shortcoming of this paper is the narrow recruitment base of the respondents – university students – who, because of their status are keenly aware of the debate regarding child labour and so may be less than truthful in the answers they give regarding how they treat the nannies and maids in their employment. In addition, the small number of respondents, 23, when there are probably ten times that number that fit the participation criterion, constrains any generalizations that could be made from the data. These and other shortcomings should be addressed in subsequent studies.

Recommendations

Key recommendations arising from this study include the following:

- i. **Enforcement of Laws and Regulations:** Although legislations exist that sought to curb and regulate child labour, they are hardly observed by employers nor are they enforced by those that are tasked with doing so. There is thus the need ensure both observance and enforcement.
- ii. **Poverty Reduction:** Poverty is at the core of why parents are forced to send their wards to work as maids and nannies. Putting adequate poverty alleviation measures and improving the incomes of parents could significantly help curb this tendency.

- iii. **Education:** Making education for all children compulsory and ensuring that the necessary facilities are put in place to accommodate all children and monitor attendance in schools. Because children would be engaged in school, they will not be available as labour for hire.
- iv. **Crèches at schools and work places:** The provision of crèches at schools and work places would help stem the need for personal maids and nannies. Thus, all schools and work organizations should have such facilities where student mothers or employees could safely and securely leave their children as they go about their studies or work.

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