

# MONEY STRUGGLES AND CITY LIFE

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Devaluation in Ibadan and Other Urban Centers  
in Southern Nigeria, 1986-1996

*Edited by*

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## Family Life under Economic Adjustment: The Rise of Child Breadwinners

*Austin N. Isamah and Rasidi A. Okunola*

### INTRODUCTION

The major road link between Lagos, the economic capital of Nigeria, and Ibadan, the second largest city, is the Lagos express road. It enters Ibadan through a tollgate located on a plain outside Idi-Iroko in the Oluyole Local Government Area. Surrounded by ridges, the tollgate constitutes a settlement of its own, with a hinterland of established farming communities within a radius of five kilometers—including Ayetoro, Olorinde, Arapaya, Abiye, Faruku, Alomaja, Idi-Ayunre, Orile-Odo, Aba-Panu, Aladorin, and Odo-Ona-Kekere—that supply fruit and bush meat to travelers. The greater tollgate area has a big Mobil filling station with a large parking lot, a mosque, an administrative block, a police post, a restaurant, and several sheds that are used by market women selling local produce. Specialists also supply various motor vehicle services: vulcanizers, semi-mobile motor mechanics, engine oil dispensers, and spare-parts dealers. The tollgate is on its way to becoming a growth center comparable to the great markets of Dugbe, Alesinloye, Gbagi, Beere, and Oja-Iba in Ibadan city. As motorists slow down to pay the mandatory toll at the tollgate, they are besieged by child traders who scramble for patronage, pushing and shouting in the attempt to out-sell each other, pleading with motorists to buy their wares. Items for sale include bread, newspapers, all manner of snacks, “pure” and iced water, boiled eggs, fruit, records, cassettes, and perfumes.

Child hawking is an old institution in Nigeria. Several times in the twentieth

century, there have been attempts to restrict it. For example, moves were made to limit the activities of young hawkers during the 1920s and 1930s and again much later, during the War Against Indiscipline (WAI) campaign of the Buhari/Idiagbon regime in 1984–1985 (Mba 1982, 218). In 1995, the authorities arbitrarily picked up child hawkers from the street, but this measure proved unworkable, and they returned in a short time. Although their persistent badgering can be a nuisance to customers, child hawkers do offer a convenient mobile market for motorists. More important, their labor provides a means of livelihood for themselves and those who send them out to sell. Many people think that their number has increased in recent years. Although there is no way of knowing this with any accuracy, numerous commentators, observers, and investigators have noted the prevalence of child hawking in new public places where potential customers are numerous and are also slowed down, such as the tollgate, traffic lights, and areas of recurrent traffic congestion.

In this work, our primary concern is with accounting for the motivations of these children and how they operate. Available literature has identified some general driving factors. These include the socioeconomic and political circumstances of a developing country faced with the crises and difficulties of nation building and economic growth, now aggravated by the conditions of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), particularly its twin conditions of devaluation and inflation (Mkandawire and Olukoshi 1995). The deteriorating economy has had its worst effects on vulnerable groups that have had to struggle to find ways of coping with the situation. One option for the poor was to send young children out to work. In Ibadan, few child workers are abandoned street children. Most are working to contribute to a family income and to their own futures. Numerous families have found this option attractive because it adds the child to the family labor force and generates much-needed income for meeting family commitments. In addition, it puts the responsibility of raising money for school fees or educational materials on the child him/herself. As Bonnet argued:

The poorer the family is, the more vulnerable it is to events, whether the event be natural, such as a plague of locusts; social, such as a war; personal, such as the loss of a relative; or seasonal, such as the arrival of the dry season. The economic environment offers neither the stability nor the flexibility needed to overcome such difficulties: the children must be put to work. (Bonnet 1993, 375)

In this chapter, we discuss one new set of conditions under which child hawkers work and the consequences of such work for community life.

## **CHILDREN AND WORK**

Traditional African society has always placed a great premium on children. They bring joy to parents, grandparents, other extended family members, and the community at large. Families and even whole communities performed rituals

and sacrifices to their ancestors and gods, so that they would be blessed with more children because they believed that children ensured the continuity of the lineage and the community. Further, children were desired as social insurance, a guarantee for the sustenance of parents in their old age. An important part of children's education in the past was designed so that they appreciated and understood their symbiotic relationship with family and community. As Whitaker put it:

An African child blesses his family's past as well as their future. He comes into this world as a gift from God and a direct link with his ancestors. As he grows, he comes to see himself as one twig on a vast tree. His parents, brothers and sisters are the closest supporting limbs, but aunts, uncles and cousins twine together almost as closely. All are rooted in the spirit of dead forebears, buried in the village. While he grows up in the village, as most Africans still do, the family order shapes his relationship with the world. Even when he lives in the city, some distance away, ties to family, near and far, ultimately determine most of his choices. (Whitaker 1988, 87)

Work was, and still is, considered an integral part of growing up, an important part of the socialization process. Even work that may appear harsh to some outsiders was simply regarded as necessary for the child to learn important skills. Through participation in work, a child was supposed to learn perseverance, responsibility to others, and moral values. Urbanization and modernization have wrought significant changes in family life, but the role of children remains essentially the same: they are still considered an important component of successful family life, and in the middle and lower social classes they are still expected to work.

The decline of the extended family in urban contexts has led to shifts in investments and returns with respect to children, exacerbated by the impoverishment, marginalization, and fragmentation of the nuclear family under stressful economic conditions. Many people have lost their jobs and turned to the uncertain incomes of the informal sector. Because of spiraling inflation, many people find it increasingly difficult to sustain themselves and their families. The inability of many parents to perform their traditional role of providing adequately for their dependents has created a situation in which children have to become not just trainees for adult roles, or even workers augmenting the household income, but serious breadwinners.

### **CHILDREN AT WORK: SURVEY FINDINGS**

Data for this study were collected through a survey of child hawkers at the Ibadan tollgate end of the Lagos-Ibadan expressway. This extended "settlement" presents an ideal environment to observe children at work because it is contained and quite structured. An initial census showed that 626 people are more or less permanently earning a living in the area immediately adjacent to the tollway.

Of this number, 262 were children of fifteen years and below. Others were adult traders, mechanics, vulcanizers, policemen, beggars, and tollgate officials. Direct observation and interviews formed the main data collection techniques. All the 262 children were interviewed over a period of two and a half weeks in 1996, while the views of some of the adults were also sought on various aspects of children's work at the tollgate.

Through a questionnaire, we ascertained some of the background characteristics of the tollgate children and their main occupations. Boys constituted a slight majority (55 percent), and they characteristically sold their wares while running after vehicles to advertise their items and make sales. Girls tended to do most of their selling standing by the roadside or in kiosks along the expressway; they did not run in the streets like the boys. Most of the children were between the ages of seven and fifteen. This is the age bracket old enough and strong enough to compete on a fairly equal basis with older traders, because they do indeed have to compete for their customers. A small proportion of children was very young, brought by adult traders who had no other child care facilities. Following a long tradition of informal education, this shades into a form of apprenticeship, for eventually these children graduate from being mere observers to full-time traders.

We were surprised to find that most of these children combined school with street trading: 184 of the children (70 percent) said they were still at school, seventy-four had dropped out, and only four said they had never attended school. The majority of those who had dropped out did so for lack of finance. We did not ascertain exactly how much school they attended—on what timetable and calendar—but they clearly identified themselves as school pupils and intended to return to class. An examination of the family background of the respondents further strengthened the basic hypothesis of the study that these children are important family breadwinners. First, almost all the children (79 percent) lived with their parents at home while others lived with guardians or other relatives. The families of child traders are quite aware of their presence on the streets as traders and, very often, put a great deal of pressure on them to remain on the job. Several children reported that parents actually flogged them whenever they failed to bring home money. The children living in family homes reported that they came from large families with a median size of eight members. Whereas large extended families were cherished in the past, they have now become a major burden for most income earners in today's urban centers. The ever rising cost of living and virtually stagnant wages have taken their toll, forcing such families to turn to the option of sending their children out to work.

Only a small proportion—about 20 percent—are adrift without any family ties, seeking a support substitute among their peers by setting up groups or gangs. As few as thirteen of the children could give no specific location at all as their home. Although a relatively small proportion of the sample of study, these homeless children represent a growing and disturbing phenomenon. Such street children are entirely autonomous: the town is their home.

The worst situation, however, is that of children who are “on hire.” Though a very small number in the sample, thirty-four children in all, this group is recruited from the rural areas of Oyo and surrounding states. Interviews with some of the children and key informants in and around the tollgate revealed that such children are put up for recruitment by their parents or guardians, who contract them out for wages ranging between ₦2,000 and ₦3,000 per annum. Typically, an agreed fee is paid up-front to the parents or guardians, on the understanding that this amount will be deducted from the wages paid to the child over a period of time. They are brought to the city and deployed to clients who either use them as household helps or as traders. Aside from the stipulated wages, such clients pay an additional amount to the agent for the services of these children. Ideally, the “foster” family takes care of the daily needs of the child worker and allows him/her an annual leave of one to two weeks, often during the Christmas/New Year celebrations. They can use these children for any form of work. Children in these relationships submitted that their parents or other relatives generally took an active part in this “trafficking,” putting pressure on the children to remain on the job even though they themselves did not necessarily have full awareness of the nature of the work for which their children were engaged. The children complained of differential treatment in their foster homes: they did not enjoy the same treatment as the other children in the house. A respondent submitted: “I have to wake up earlier than Mama’s children. I take care of the house . . . and oftentimes prepare the young ones for school . . . I report here as early as 7:30 AM . . . and do not get to take dinner until after 8:30 P.M., after I have rendered the day’s account.” Children who were sent by relatives to foster parents as apprentices also complained of harsher treatment. Their own conditions could be even worse than contracted workers. A fifteen-year-old girl lamented: “I am being treated like a slave . . . I dare not eat on the dining table with the other children . . . I have to wait till they finish eating . . . If I complain to my parents in the village, all they say to me is that I should persevere. They always argue that it is part of my training to become somebody in life.”

These two categories recall the *iwofa* (labor pawning) institution prevalent in precolonial Yoruba society so vividly described by Oroge (1985). He states: “Iwofa, as an institution, thrive[d] largely on calamity. Wars, raids, famine, scarcity of cowries and imperative heavy expenses that could not be met by normal efforts were potent factors in the growth of the institution.” Thus, the push factors for *iwofa* were broadly similar to contemporary child labor. Nevertheless, it is also important to remember that present-day child hawkers are not pawned by their parents. Most of the affected children reported that they had to work to help solve financial problems in the family, but they are hired out as wage workers, not to repay interest on a debt. In principle, they appear not to be tied labor, even though they may be intimidated labor. The researchers noted that the children often had a very clear sense of their rights. Some had left “wicked” masters for other more humane and generous ones.



**Table 4.1**  
**Parents' Occupation**

<i>Occupation</i>	<i>Father</i>	<i>Mother</i>
<b>Trader</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>223</b>
<b>Farmer</b>	<b>25</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Artisan</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Driver</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>—</b>
<b>Civil servant</b>	<b>43</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Others</b>	<b>34</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>262</b>	<b>262</b>

Parents' occupations provide a rough indicator of the likelihood of parents sending their own children out to work. Attempts to obtain an accurate picture of the incomes of the parents were largely unsuccessful because either the children did not know or, when pressed, gave what were considered unrealistic estimates. Table 4.1 provides a summary of the occupations of the fathers and mothers of the respondents, from which a general idea of the parents' incomes and socioeconomic status can be inferred.

The distribution of parents' occupations shows that a majority works in the informal sector. In fact, only nine mothers and forty-three fathers were employed in the formal sector of the economy. The vast majority of the mothers were traders, many of whom also had their shops and kiosks on the highways, which serve as depots for the wares that their children sell on the street. The largest single category of fathers comprised artisans: motor mechanics, panel beaters, electricians, and so on. Most of these occupations yield low and uncertain incomes, and consequently, all members must contribute to the family livelihood.

Children who sell are links in chains of distribution. What are the sources of their supplies and what conditions of remuneration prevail? The items sold are procured from several sources, the most important of which are their mothers and external suppliers. The external suppliers are businessmen and businesswomen (or in some cases, commercial firms) who provide limited credit facilities to the traders or who employ the children as commissioned agents. In the latter case, at the end of each business day, the child trader renders an account to the supplier, who, after deducting the cost price of the articles sold, pays the child some agreed sum of money from the profit as commission. Alternatively, the mothers of the children or other female relatives provide the supplies, especially edible items such as "iced" water, boiled eggs, and snacks. In this case, all

**Table 4.2**  
**Average Reported Gross Sales per Day**

Less than ₦100	19
₦100-₦200	49
₦201-₦300	39
₦301-₦400	17
₦401-₦500	28
Above ₦500	101
Cannot say	9
<b>Total</b>	<b>262</b>

money earned is returned to the supplier who may hand a small sum back to the child as pocket money.

In terms of gross income, the children either do not calculate or cannot report the net amounts earned on their trade. Although the business may seem small to passersby, these children report handling more money than might be expected (see Table 4.2). Quite a number of children gross more than ₦400 a day (about \$5 at the 1997 exchange rate), not an inconsequential sum in a society where the official minimum wage is ₦2,000 (\$25) a month. Many of the child traders said that when the cost of production was deducted, quite a substantial amount passed through their hands, except on unlucky days when their wares might have been seized by the police or stolen by unscrupulous passengers who delay payment until their vehicles move off. Most of what the children make at the end of the day is handed over to their parents who usually give them some money for themselves, so they may not know what the economic margin is on their efforts. In terms of their own income, some of the children, however, confided that it is a common practice for them to keep some money for personal use, either for supplementing school fees or toward the purchase of some desired goods. This accords with traditional norms and is tacitly accepted by their parents, who expect the children to use the money to substitute for costs they might otherwise have borne.

In addition to giving children some financial responsibility, street vending also demands personal resilience. Conditions of work can be difficult and dangerous. The protection of life and property in and around the tollgate is the formal responsibility of various security operatives, including the police, state security service, quarantine officers, and military intelligence who are posted there for routine checks. Their activities are coordinated from the police post located at the tollgate. Although the traders and hawkers must rely on these officers of the law for regular protection, they are often victims of police ha-

rassment. Street trading has been banned by law, so the police are liable to make intermittent sweeps of an area, during which they arrest the traders and confiscate their goods. Children are vulnerable, both to police incursions and other conflicts because they have no formal associations. In case of interpersonal conflict, the children submitted that there are mechanisms for resolution through informal and contextual groupings often headed by the assumed eldest person present. There are some cases of clustering among the child hawkers based on residential neighborhood, which often affects their alignment during interpersonal conflicts. Thus, classic Yoruba principles of seniority and neighborhood are extrapolated to the street competitiveness of the tollgate.

Another classic social form that operates for some children is the *bàbá ìsàlẹ̀* (literally “father of the area,” but now this term is commonly translated as “godfather”). The presence of undesirable elements like touts, drug peddlers, and area boys (young thugs) in and around the tollgate has further complicated the working conditions and security of life in the area, especially for the children. These undesirables routinely harass traders and child hawkers. Where such harassment is overt, the “official” security agents do attempt to “help” as much as they can within the limit of their will and their resources. Their failure to give full protection has led to the operation of various underground and private security networks in and around the tollgate, centered in the institution of the *bàbá ìsàlẹ̀*. These *bàbá ìsàlẹ̀* protection networks operate independently of the child hawkers, although they are readily accessible to them in times of need. About 2 percent of our sample submitted that they subscribed to one or other of these *bàbá ìsàlẹ̀* networks. The concerned respondents hesitated to discuss direct fee payment for protection nor were they willing to identify these godfathers. Observations, however, revealed that several such networks center around the National Union of Road Transport Workers (NURTW) within the tollgate area. This was observed through the frequency of free services provided to some elderly and “strong” men by the child hawkers, mainly in the form of running errands, washing clothes, washing vehicles, and so on.

Two such cases that came to the notice of the researchers were followed up. We found that the parents of the concerned children had “handed” the children over to a *bàbá ìsàlẹ̀* who was an executive member of the NURTW, Toll Gate Branch. The *bàbá ìsàlẹ̀* lived in the neighborhood of the children’s parents. His role involved monitoring the children’s activities and seeing to it that no evil befell them. The *bàbá ìsàlẹ̀* reported receiving occasional gifts from the parents of the children and free service from the children, often in the form of errands. The children are expected to report to him any form of harassment or other problems they encounter. When such reports are made, he makes inquiries of those concerned. In extreme cases, the *bàbá ìsàlẹ̀*, as one of the leaders in the tollgate community, can request help from the security operatives around the tollgate.

## DISCUSSION

The attitude of the child traders themselves toward street trading was sought. Not surprisingly, most (84.4 percent) said they did not enjoy street trading, while 95 percent said that if they were given the opportunity, they would rather stop. Despite such feelings, the children accept street trading as essential for the survival of their families. Several issues arise from the involvement of children in street trading. First, there is the issue of the risks inherent in this type of work. The expressway is a very dangerous place to work even for adults. Erratic driving and vehicle failures are commonplace, and the tollgate can harbor criminal activities related to armed robbery and the transport of contraband goods. The risk of injury and even death is ever present in the day-to-day activities of these children. Accidents involving child traders do happen, and most of the children confirmed that they knew at least one person who had been involved in a vehicle accident. They might also get caught up in the crossfire between armed robbers and the police. One fourteen-year-old female trader in the study bore the scars of gunshot wounds that she had sustained from armed robbers.

The children are also exposed to inclement weather while trying to make sales. Sales have to be made in the open tropical sun or torrential rain. Many suffer from fatigue and body aches. Since the majority of the children said they were still at school, the fatigue is compounded and must interfere with their performance. There is hardly any time for homework in a situation where children go from school to work and do not return home until late in the day, when they are too tired to study. Parents, who are beneficiaries of the economic activities of their children, have little or no incentive to discourage them from eventually dropping out. Their example may influence their fellow classmates to leave school at an early age.

Another danger faced by these children is the possibility of exploitation and abuse by adults. They are employed by parents and goods suppliers who do not necessarily give them any regular wages. Children on hire and those on "apprenticeship" were particularly vulnerable to bad treatment. Among the girls, several instances of sexual harassment and even rape were reported. It was difficult to ascertain whether any action was taken. They can also suffer from arbitrary arrests by the police, who seize their wares and fine them for illegal activities. Sometimes they suffer abuse from adult traders, who feel that the children deprived them of sales because of their ability to move faster.

Finally, there is the exposure of these young children to the subculture of the street. Many of them have developed an acute money consciousness. Much of their conversation with each other centers on how to make money and what they would do with it. This tempts many of them into dishonest behavior, such as giving incorrect change to passengers or dilly-dallying in returning change in the hope that the vehicle will move off before the change can be given. A greater source of worry is that some children sell stolen goods given to them by adults or engage in product adulteration in order to make more money. All

of these practices must take their toll on the physical, moral, and psychological development of these children.

## CONCLUSION

Street trading in this dangerous setting at the tollgate represents a threat to the physical and psychological development of the children involved. In a sense the tollgate constitutes a community, with regular members and rules of behavior, some having analogs in the past and others deriving from the formal sector of business and police. But it is very hierarchical, with the child hawkers at the bottom. Livelihoods are very risky, and the children, who clamor at the windows of cars and chase them, run daily risks of accidents or even death. We have the strong impression that these new sites of child labor are multiplying and the numbers of children involved in this activity are increasing. The situation seems to confirm the expectation that the increased poverty and insecurity caused by inflation makes it difficult for families to make ends meet and encourages them to send their children out to work in places like the Ibadan tollgate. This experience will be their apprenticeship into the society and economy of the future.

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