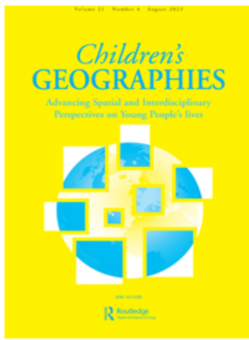

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On exploitation, agency and child domestic work: evidence from South-West Nigeria

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ABSTRACT
The engagement of children in domestic work in third-party households is mostly conceived as a decision that benefits adult actors – employers, intermediaries and/or parents – at the expense of young people. Thus, child domestic workers are often depicted as victims of different kinds of exploitation – ranging from the nature of their recruitment to the work they do; and the conditions under which the work is done. This popular representation of children as 'helpless victims', however, undermines working children's capacity to navigate the complexities that surround their living and working situations. Based on primary data gathered from fieldwork in South-West Nigeria, this paper examines how, with limited options, child domestic workers defy the victimhood narrative. It argues that even in the face of severe constraints, child domestic workers still find ways to exercise their agency. It concludes by highlighting the complexity of childhood work experiences; arguing for a more nuanced understanding of the same; and the need to rethink the frameworks and/or support networks for child domestic workers.

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Introduction

It is almost a cliché to say that children engaged in domestic service in third party households are often subject to different kinds of exploitation – from their recruitment to the work they do; and the conditions under which they do the work. Some of the negative experiences of child domestic work that have been discussed include the fact that child domestic workers may be forced to work by their parents or other adults around them; they may be on call round the clock; they may be underpaid or not paid at all; they may be prevented from going to school; they may not have access to healthcare services; and they are often powerless against the irrational and unpredictable behaviours of their employers or the intermediaries involved in their work arrangements (See HRW 2007, 2009, 2012; Jha 2009; Oluwaniyi 2009; Blagbrough 2010; ILO-IPEC 2013; Muhammad 2014; Save the Children 2006 among others). Thus, the bulk of empirical studies on child domestic work in most cases are situated within the dominant exploitation and rescue narratives (Bourdillon 2014:2).

These narratives have largely resulted in policies seeking to protect children and rescue them from these 'heartless adults'. However, these policies have also been found to result in unintended consequences (O'Neill 2003; Jacquemin 2006; Bourdillon et al. 2010). For example, some 'victims' have been found to return to work after their 'rescue' (See GMACL 2014, 18; Olayiwola 2019). As a result, an increasing number of academics (and activists) have questioned this narrative of 'helpless victims', and argued for a more nuanced analysis of children's work experiences (O'Neill 2003;

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O'Connell Davidson 2005; Bourdillon et al. 2010). These scholars have discussed the need to recognise children's agency in migratory and work decisions. Some of the arguments include how children may be active in their migratory processes (Punch 2007; Hashim and Thorsen 2011; Heissler 2013); how they may have positive experiences of their work and/or decisions to migrate for work (Okyere 2012; Boyden and Howard 2013; Bourdillon et al. 2010, 138); and the dynamics of the employer-employee relationships in non-Western societies (Klocker 2014). Such studies have rejected claims of universally exploitative adults and exploited children in most of the phenomena that may be described as child labour and/or child trafficking.

However, there is a dearth of studies focusing on how children may adapt to unfavourable work situations, especially in relation to domestic service. In relation to domestic work in general, some have documented the resistance strategies of migrant domestic workers to argue against 'the powerlessness bias' in the literature (see Stasiulis and Bakan 1997; Momsen 1999), but a discussion of such strategies by child domestic workers is scarce – partly because of the political value of children's passivity in international rights discourse (Hoffman 2010), or the danger of being misinterpreted as condoning their abuse and exploitation (Bourdillon 2006; Klocker 2014). This study therefore aims to address this gap without eulogising child domestic work or downplaying the abusive tendencies inherent therein.

Conceptualising children agency

Although arguments abound on children's agency, much of these relate to a binary conception of agency against dependency; freedom against unfreedom; and being active versus being passive (Oswell 2013). However, children's everyday lives show an interplay of structure and agency and moving along a continuum that make such hard classifications problematic (O'Connell Davidson 2005; Hashim and Thorsen 2011; Abebe 2012). Children may be independent and dependent at the same time and may experience changing degrees of both at other times. Thus, the notion of interdependence is more appropriate in discussing children's agency (Punch 2015; Abebe 2012).

Agency is thus presented as a relational concept rather than what children possess (Sutterlüty and Tisdall 2019). It is not accepted 'uncritically as being a positive thing' (Tisdall and Punch 2012, 256), neither is it explained in terms of what is merely exercised as a matter of individual choice or autonomy (Bell and Aggleton 2012, 2013); it is understood as being affected by contexts, structures and the dynamics of the social world within which children are immersed (Wyness 2015; Punch 2016). Questions have thus been raised about the degree, nature and impact of agency that can be attributed to children in different contexts, or how their position of vulnerability can be undermined in a context of extreme structural constraints with a focus on agency (Bluebond-Langner and Korbin 2007, 242; Tisdall and Punch 2012, 256).

Thus, agency can be seen to be 'ambiguous' (Bordonaro and Payne 2012) – where children act contrary to established ideals or expected behaviours in certain contexts; 'negotiated' and 'constrained'(Punch 2007) – by household interdependencies within and across generations; 'invisible'(Edmonds 2019) – based on the normative ways in which the concept is used universally as an analytic tool rather than something that is socio-culturally grounded; or 'ordinary' or 'everyday', not simply something expressed in the context of coping and crisis (Payne 2012).

In relation to child domestic workers, Klocker (2007) used the concepts of 'thin' and 'thick' agency to counter the claim of passivity and ignorance of children. Influenced by Giddens' structuration theory and Foucault's notion of power as relational, 'thin' agency is exhibited in highly restrictive contexts and 'thick' agency is depicted by actions or decisions within a much broader range of options. Klocker identifies a continuum along which agency can be 'thickened' or 'thinned' by structures and contexts within which young people live. She explained that factors such as poverty, age and gender contribute to the thinning of children's agency. However, having little power relative to adults does not mean children cannot exercise their agency. Jensen (2014) also noted the interplay of 'thin' and 'thick' agency with regards to how child domestic workers respond to socio-cultural expectations in Dhaka.

These concepts do not offer different (and conflicting) views on agency. Rather, they help to convey a picture of the complex interplay between social conditions and children's decisions and actions (Tisdall and Punch 2012; Sutterlüty and Tisdall 2019). Agency of children is therefore about how they navigate multiple (and intersecting) structures of dominance (Jeffrey 2012). In what follows, I present the contexts and various ways in which agency is exercised by children in domestic service. In this way, my paper offers an account of the efforts of child domestic workers and/or their parents to make the most of their living situations and working arrangements. I straddle between narratives of exploitation and benefits in explaining how children navigate their work situations and cases of abuse or exploitation – a gap in the current literature (Thorsen 2012, 16).

The remaining part of the paper is organised as follows: there is a brief discussion of the methodology underpinning the article before drawing on the conceptual ideas above and using the empirical material to offer up analytic findings on current and former child domestic workers in Nigeria. I conclude by arguing for a more nuanced approach to discussing the experiences of abuse and exploitation in child domestic work.

Methodology

The data used for this paper was part of a multi-sited qualitative study conducted between December 2017 and May 2018 in South-Western Nigerian cities of Lagos, Ibadan, and Abeokuta, as well as villages around these cities. For this study, I combined observation with semi-structured interviews. I was interested in various aspects of people's lives, events and everyday social relations that may be significant in understanding child domestic work (CDW) between the 'sending' communities and the 'receiving' cities. The idea was to get a good grasp of the conditions of living, childhood experiences, children's lives, and daily activities. The observational form in this regard ranged between 'nonparticipation' and 'moderate participation' (Spradley 1980) in the study sites. Moving between these locations, 'hanging out' and 'conversing' while consciously observing and recording my observation enhanced the quality and interpretation of data that I was be able to get through interviews (Musante 2014). Additionally, some of the issues I observed became significant points for discussions and provided broader context for the rest of my research enterprise (Agar, 1996 in Musante 2014).

Initial participants were recruited through existing contacts in these cities, and snowballing sampling was used to recruit the others in these sites as well as in the villages.

Participants included 49 children (current child domestic workers) and 53 adults (including former child domestic workers, parents and employers of child domestic workers, intermediaries, and officials of NGOs and government agencies working to rescue child domestic workers). However, this paper mainly focuses on the responses of child participants. Detailed accounts of findings from the other participants including employers are offered elsewhere (see Olayiwola 2021a, 2021b).

The interviews with child domestic workers included questions relating to their family backgrounds, how they became domestic workers, their living and working conditions, their perception of work, their employers as well as current policies against their work, and their future aspirations. While participants reported positive and negative experiences of work, the focus of this paper is how children and/or their parents navigate negative work experiences.

I conducted individual and group interviews with all the key actors discussed above in either the local languages (Yoruba or Pidgin English) or the English language. I translated all recordings into the English language while transcribing the audios. My command of the local languages is excellent, but I agree with scholars who argue that meaning may get lost in the interpretation process (see Van Nes et al. 2010 for example) – especially because there were instances where participants used local proverbs and/or terminologies to explain their views. In cases like that, I relied on the local understandings of such words or statements in my analysis and report.

The data were analysed using thematic content analysis following the process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Ethical considerations

The study was part of a doctoral research conducted at the time. I applied for ethical approval through the University I was attending at the time to ensure that the entire research process was guided by standard ethical principles including informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality as well as avoidance of harm (BSA 2017). The issue of safety of the participants for the study, particularly children, was closely related to the settings where the interviews took place. Before approaching all child participants for interviews, I sought the consent of the adults with a duty of care towards them such as parents or guardians, employers, teachers and/or school authorities (Ibid).

Whilst this was largely positive, I was also conscious of the fact that children might consider their participation more in terms of duty or responsibility to be obedient to adults as dictated by their culture, rather than their own freewill (Jacquemin 2004; Chandra 2008). In order to ensure that the children were not feeling obligated, I let them decide when and where the interviews would take place, and in some instances, deliberately deferred the interviews – after they had agreed to be interviewed – for them to carefully consider the decision to participate in the study (Okyere 2017). I was also conscious of the fact that interviewing children in domestic work might cause them emotional harm if they had to recollect issues of violence and abuse against them. Thus, I checked that the children were comfortable with whatever information they were sharing with me throughout the interviews. I was also careful to reaffirm their rights to discontinue the study or stop the interview at any time if they felt uncomfortable or showed any signs of emotional distress.

While it was difficult for me to ascertain to what extent these issues probably affected the children, I got responses – discussed in the next section – that they would not have given if they were concerned about their employers' reactions. I was also committed to my duty of care and protection to the children beyond the research. For example, if disclosure of harm and abuse was made, I offered to report to the appropriate authorities if they wanted me to or advised them and/or their parents about where to get necessary support for free if they did not want this reported (O'Connell Davidson 2005; Okyere 2017). This pragmatic approach (not to report) was considered better because of the potential for reprisal especially if the child was still under the same employer while they or their parents or guardians considered their options. In sum, I endeavoured to act in consonance with the societal, moral and legal expectations of the research setting where issues which were not directly covered in the ethical guidelines emerged in the course of the fieldwork (Okyere 2017, 2019). I was also in touch with many of the children after the research to ensure that their participation in the study had not resulted in any negative consequences for them. As a result, I have had diverse experiences with them – some have called my mobile number to seek career advice, or to connect me with their parents; and one girl met me in church some days after I had interviewed her to give me updates about her plans to leave her employer.

Dealing with exploitative and abusive conditions

Child domestic workers and/or their parents adopt different tactics in dealing with exploitative work situations and abusive employers. In this section, I discuss some of the factors which facilitate or hamper child domestic workers' resistance strategies which serve to effectively complicate their representation as 'helpless victims'. These include but are not limited to withdrawal or change of employers or adult caretakers, running away, putting up uncooperating attitudes and behaviours among others. Thus, although children may not always be able to freely choose their residence (or working conditions), they are not always 'helpless victims':

Withdrawal or change of employers

> I had gone to a place in Lagos before, but they did not enrol me in a school as promised, so I had to leave … I informed my parents, and they simply informed my employers to release me **(Lola, 15 years old)**

By far the commonest response to abuse and maltreatment (including disagreements over fees, education expenses and other arrangements) was withdrawal from and/or change of employers. However, in most cases, withdrawal from an employer did not mean complete removal from work but a change of work environment. Such changes are often made in relation to the consideration of the benefits of work (for example, education as in the case of Lola above) and should not be conflated with ignorance and irresponsibility of parents as often presented in the 'helpless victim' narrative.

For some child domestic workers, changing employers was a way of demonstrating their conviction about the benefits of domestic work, while for others, it was simply because, to paraphrase Robinson (2006:, 45), the misery of exploitation in domestic work is nothing compared to the alternatives:

> I will remain here because if I go to the village, things cannot improve. I could not read when I was in the village for example. **(John, 16 years old)**

Like decisions regarding entry into domestic service, changing employers or adult caretakers could be the sole decision of child domestic workers or their parents, or it could be a joint decision between child domestic workers and their parents. This was also confirmed by Sommerfelt's (2001) study in Morocco. For example, while Lola (above) initiated the process, there were other participants for whom the withdrawal or change was initiated by their parents. The picture here contradicts such claims as parents being ignorant of the misery of their working children, being powerless to help their children; or of child domestic workers being stuck with abusive employers because 'they have nowhere else to go' (HRW 2007, 15). The change could also be because of better opportunities elsewhere. For example, some other studies of young migrants and/or child domestic workers in West Africa have established that changing jobs or leaving one employer for another is not only a way of escaping exploitation, but also a medium for earning higher wages or learning new skills, or as a life course transition (Buchbinder 2013; Thorsen 2014; Thorsen and Jacquemin 2015).

Children on the run

> … there was a day I threatened them (my madam and the husband). I ran away from home and went to sleep over at my friend's place. I left her children with the neighbour with a message for her. She became worried, but I was not far away from home. She went to the police station, and they put my pictures everywhere, but they did not find me. I went back home early the next morning and she told me how troubled they had been … I did that to show her that I was serious about leaving her for good **… (Lisa, 13 years old)**

Another resistance mechanism or agentic practice by child domestic workers in the face of exploitation or abuse was to run away from their place of work or abusive employers. What is profound here is that although child domestic workers are mostly hidden in private homes, they are not isolated. Almost all the child domestic workers I interviewed had contacts with peers, or with people in their neighbourhoods who could influence their decision to abscond and/or provide the support to do so if necessary. For some of these young people, the decision to run away or stay put was taken with several considerations which I discuss in a later section. For example, Lisa, from above, wanted to complete her primary school education before leaving her employer.

Likewise, for those that had worked with more than one employer, running away could be a form of agitation to return to an employer they perceived as a better option. For example, *Temi* (16 years old), had worked for a particular employer for about six years before returning to her village in Benin, but she was taken elsewhere to work after she returned to Nigeria. She found it difficult to adjust to the living and working conditions in the new place, so she decided to run away from her new employer and return to her former employer instead of going back to the village. Her plan was to learn a trade before getting married, and she concluded that she had a

better chance of doing so with the (former) employer. Lisa, introduced above, also explained that she wanted to leave her current employer '*at all costs because I preferred my former employer*' … (***Lisa)***

These cases show that while it may be easy to categorise children's work situations and living conditions as 'helpless', it is also important to emphasize that their decisions, either to remain in a specific work environment or run away later exemplify these adolescents' (constrained) agency in different contexts (Jensen 2014). For these children, their 'active' decisions to remain in such situation is arguably a passive form of agency as I will elaborate later.

Refusal and uncooperating attitude to work

> I told my parents that I did not like the place; I was crying all day and they had to call the person that took me there to return me home … Initially they were not happy about it … but they did not force me to go back. It was afterwards that they brought me to this (new) place … **(Lydia, 14 years old)**
> I left because my former employer was too wicked; she was just wicked! She would send me on errands beyond what I could handle. And at times, she would not give us (myself and the other house helps she had) any food … I had to lie to go to my father's place, and when I got to my father, I cried that I did not want to go back to the job (**Destiny, 15 years old)**

In some instances, child domestic workers resorted to different tactics to force their employers or intermediaries to send them back to their parents from where they explored alternatives. Some cried continuously, refused to eat, or refused to work, thereby leaving the employers with no choice than to send them back to their parents and/or guardians. Child domestic workers also reported lying about different issues to be able to return home if the needed help was not coming fast enough. These strategies were also used to resist attempts by exploitative intermediaries, guardians, or other adults – that may be involved in the recruitment process – to place children with employers that they might not be comfortable with for various reasons. Similar uncooperative attitudes and 'silence strategies' were reported by Awumbila, Teye, and Yaro (2017) in their study of migrant domestic workers in Ghana.

To report or not to report?

> I cannot report the things I do not like about my auntie (her employer) to my parents because if I did, they might confront the woman, and she might punish me … **(Jacinta, 12 years old)**
> I was with my former employer for three years before I left. She had two children, and it was my responsibility to take care of them. I did house chores, and almost every other task at home, but the woman was too cruel … Sometimes, she would shout at me, and I would be shivering. Then, to make it worse, the husband was harassing me sexually, and I was wary of such. So, I asked to see my mum, and I explained everything to her. I was like 15years old and attending a school then, but I had to leave … that was how I left with my mum **… (Miracle, former domestic worker, 21 years old)**

Some child domestic workers reported being afraid of possible sanctions and further punishments if they reported their employers to their parents or even complained to the intermediaries – especially if the employers or intermediaries were related to or had close relationships with the parents. This should be understood in the context of informal fosterage in West Africa (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997; Omoike 2010) as I will discuss later. Some child domestic workers also reported not being able to communicate freely on the phone with their parents in the presence of their employers or not having enough time to discuss their concerns with their parents. Lucy, for example, communicates with her parents regularly, but she never mentions the fact that her employer insults her and uses derogatory remarks on her because, according to her, '*if I did, my parents would mention it to my auntie* (the employer), *and she might be punishing me for that*' ***(Linda, 12 years old).*** However, some had no problems reporting maltreatment to their parents or intermediaries. One of the strategies adopted by child domestic workers in this regard was to communicate with their parents when they were away from their employers. Some reported using friends' and neighbours' mobile phones

to report concerns to their parents or to seek help from neighbours, teachers, and other individuals in their networks that could help them.

Whether child domestic workers stayed or persisted with the situation after complaining was dependent on various factors beyond the children. For example, some left with the backing of parents who felt the employers or adult caretakers had abused their trust. Others explained that their parents advised or encouraged them to bear with the situation until they attain certain milestones in their education or apprenticeship, or because they felt the situation at home was no better than what the children were facing.

In general, parents and/or guardians were more inclined to act when they felt the situation being described by their children (such as sexual harassment and persistence of duties which went way beyond what children in most Nigerian homes would be ordinarily called upon to perform) were too egregious relative to the perceived benefit(s). The decisions to keep a child in a supposedly negative environment or to withdraw them are often taken in considerations of the welfare (immediate and future) of the child, the severity of the circumstances in which the child is living and more significantly whether the child is in a situation in which they are being compelled to undertake tasks which completely outstrip what is regarded as normal for children in their socio-cultural context.

Not reporting as a sign of 'maturity'

> I will remain here because if I go to the village, things cannot improve. I could not read when I was in the village. (**John, 16 years old**)
>
> … I do not want to tell my dad (about my negative experiences of work) because … if he knew, he would be sad about it – he would see it as a failure on his part to take care of his children … My dad is not financially stable for now … he would be bothered because of that … **(Zainab, 17 years old)**

For many current and former child domestic workers, refraining from reporting abusive or exploitative treatments and instead trying to address it personally was a sign of maturity and independence. This choice was often made by child domestic workers upon reflecting on the situation back home as in the case of John and Zainab above. In another case, Victoria (18 years old), had come from Kogi state (middle belt) in Nigeria in 2012 to work in exchange for her education in Ibadan. She explained to me that her employer was very nice to her, but the employer's children were not very accommodating to her. Despite being maltreated by her employer's children (they were all older than her) at the time, she did not tell her grandfather in the village:

> … because if I did, my grandfather would want me to come back to the village, and I don't want to go back to the village … I just want to complete my education here, and find my bearing … thinking about everything, I prefer the city …

She eventually moved away from the place as she could no longer tolerate constant sexual harassment by her employer's son. She has been supported by friends, church members, and other informal means as is customary in the absence of a formal social welfare system (World Bank 2019, 18; Olayiwola 2021a). When she eventually narrated what had happened to her family, she was advised to return home, but she insisted on remaining in the city to pursue her educational goals.

Choices, contexts and complexities

In this section, I provide an analysis of some of the key findings from the above. I discuss socio-economic constraints, age, relational connections, personal dignity and integrity as factors and influences on children's agency in the context of child domestic work. It is worth stating that these categories are intricately linked, and they are better understood in the context of multiple difficulties that confront many children in the Third World.

Socio-economic constraints

In all the cases above, it could be argued that the choices and decisions made by children and/or their parents were predicated on the considerations of the potential benefits and costs of leaving the work or changing employers especially in relation to the alternatives available to them. Without idealising the difficult choices these young people have made, I argue that their stories and experiences contradict and complicate the helpless victim narrative which characterises many mainstream accounts of child domestic work. Instead, accounts from my research show that children's agentic practice (Maxwell and Aggleton 2014) to remain in their situation despite being cognisant of the abuse and exploitation is in response to socio-economic constraints around them. The consideration of these constraints is important in understanding how agency is actually exercised – for example, the process of considering the advantages and disadvantages of different situations, and of assessing the consequences of different choices.

In the case of Nigeria, the country has the largest number of people in extreme poverty in the world, and there is no formal support for the poorest households (World Bank 2019). Everyday survival remains a struggle for more than half of the population (The Guardian 2018), and reliance on informal networks for support is common (World Bank 2019). Other structural challenges in the country include poor public infrastructures, high unemployment, job losses, among others (Falola and Heaton 2008). Choices made by child domestic workers and/or their parents are better understood in this context of extreme poverty, huge rural-urban disparities, as well as deficiencies in infrastructures and state welfare provisions (Olayiwola 2021a). Thus, as seen above, some children remain in domestic service or choose not to report negative experiences at work because it affords them opportunities to meet their basic needs, go to school, or even to help their families in times of crisis. Others may leave domestic service or change employers for similar reasons. These show how socio-cultural and economic constraints influence children's agentic practice.

The above shows that children become domestic workers for different reasons. This also implies that child domestic workers are not a homogenous category. For example, child domestic workers in Nigeria could be distinguished in terms of their places of origin – they may come from neighbouring West African countries, from rural areas within the country and around the major cities, or they may be working within the same neighbourhoods or near where their parents live. These distinctions are significant in understanding children's constrained agency (Punch 2007; Jensen 2014). For example, those that are migrants (from neighbouring West African countries or rural areas in the country) tend to return home every year which gives them an opportunity to change employers or earn higher wages as earlier discussed. These are 'flighty employees' (Klocker 2014) compared to those working around the same neighbourhoods where their parents live. Other distinctions could also be made in terms of whether children are working for direct monetary remuneration or not (that is, in exchange for education or apprenticeship), whether they are working full-time or part-time, children's relationships with their employers, as well as the type and income of households where children work (See Olayiwola 2021a).

It is also important to emphasize how different motivations for entry into domestic work can have an impact on how children exercise agency. As shown above, children and/or their parents are constrained in their response to maltreatment by the perceived benefits of working in domestic service relative to the alternatives. With limited options, child domestic work is always a matter of balancing risks with benefits, and it is often considered by many as a short-term solution to their predicaments (Olayiwola 2021b). Framing them as 'modern slaves', 'helpless victims' or as being unfree will be inappropriate – especially since many do not become or remain domestic workers by physical force or deception, but by economic constraints (Alber 2011). Instead, their agency or 'freedom' could be explained in the fact that child domestic workers do not always accept every offer that is presented to them; they do not always stay long with the same employer or in an abusive condition; and they usually employ different strategies as explained above to escape bad working conditions.

Age and relative experience

The examples of John and Victoria above, also show the significance of age in exercising agency. In general, older child domestic workers (15 years and above in this study) were less likely to report negative work experiences to their parents or guardians than younger children (perhaps between 10 and 12 years old). Older children were also more likely to be involved in the process of weighing up choices and situations; or the costs and benefits of withdrawing from or enduring negative work situations than younger domestic workers (Alber 2011). This is in conformity with local variations and understandings of childhood in many non-western settings (Nieuwenhuys 2009), where distinction is often made between very young children and older teenagers, and this influences what is expected of children as well as what is considered acceptable or unacceptable decisions (Bastia 2005; Alber 2011; Howard 2017). Thus, younger children, like Lisa and Damude above, had to rely on their parents' assessments of their situations. These children admitted that their parents were instrumental in the decisions to remain in domestic service, and they could not disobey their parents' wishes, but they also felt that the decision was in their best interests or that the parents wanted the best for them – a key principle of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child – especially considering the poverty at home or the opportunity for education that domestic work offered them.

On the other hand, older teenagers or more experienced children might be afforded more opportunity to choose where to work, for whom, and for how long as confirmed elsewhere in West Africa (see Alber 2011 and Thorsen 2014). These scholars agree that older children in domestic service are often able to negotiate and receive their wages directly, manage their earnings, and change employers or decide to work in other sectors (Ibid).

Cultural expectations, relational connections and family dynamics

The process of weighing the risks and benefits of different situations may be further complicated by cultural factors and/or family dynamics. In Nigeria, as in many West African countries, children are expected to be obedient to adults, and as proven elsewhere, the submissiveness with which children are expected to conduct themselves in relation to adults around them may make it difficult for them to assert themselves in the context of exploitation and harm (Klocker 2007). Thus, children may remain in domestic service (or change employers) contrary to their will as exemplified by children such as Lisa and Lydia above.

Cultural expectations around girls to be homemakers might keep them longer in domestic service than boys (see Alber 2011). In addition to the 'training' that girls in domestic work are believed to be exposed to, they may be constrained to continue in domestic service to prepare for marriage – especially in societies where girls are expected to assemble their dowry or acquire a trousseau, obtain material possessions including kitchen utensils, clothes, jewellery, among others to prove their readiness for marriage (HRW 2007; Alber 2011; Lesclingand and Hertrich 2017). Also, the link between fostering – the practice of sending out children to live with friends, relatives or extended family members – and child domestic work in West Africa is well-documented (Coquery-Vidrovitch 1997, 116; Omoike 2010). Thus, where familial relational connection is involved, it might be more complicated to report or address cases of abuse. Indeed, some studies have suggested that children working with family members are more susceptible to abuse than those working with non-relatives (HRW 2007).

The above also has implications for how exploitation is to be understood. It has been argued that the emphasis on exploitation depicts child domestic work solely as an economic relationship, whereas it can be a form of obligation towards members of one's own (extended) family, kin or community (Klocker 2014). For example, the employer-employee relationship in child domestic work is described more in terms of affective issues like loving and caring for child domestic workers than in terms of wages and working conditions (Klocker 2014, 474).

Personal dignity, integrity and ambitions

Decisions to continue in domestic service or not could also be linked to personal dignity, integrity and/or ambitions (Nyamnjoh 2005). Child domestic workers' (or their parents') commitment to education, considerations of their families' deprivation and other adverse circumstances could underpin the reasons why they may continue with an employer or seek alternatives. For some, the goal of acquiring formal education and the 'prestige' of living in the city are worth the challenges that come with working in domestic service. These children may thus exercise agency through open resistance (as explained above) or 'resourcefulness' – defined simply as ability to survive (Katz 2004). Children may also take personal pride and satisfaction in being able to make money to pursue their life's ambitions (Bourdillon et al. 2010; Pawson 2022). In such cases, experiences of work, as well as decisions to continue in exploitative work or seek alternatives, are often premised upon a popular 'hardship ideology' in West Africa – the belief that hardship or 'struggle' is sometimes necessary for development and success in life (Bledsoe 1990; Hashim and Thorsen 2011).

To borrow from Castles (2004)'s analysis of restrictive migration policies, there is need to understand the interplay between structural factors and children's agency for policies to be effective. By discussing child domestic work in terms of the interplay of structural factors and individual's adaptive mechanisms, this paper builds on work related to children's agency. The paper has attempted to make the agency of children 'visible' (Edmonds 2019) by situating the perspectives of child domestic workers and their agentic practice within the Nigerian economic and socio-cultural systems. By discussing passive agency, the idea that being 'passive' is actually being agentic, the paper contributes towards the development of 'socio-culturally grounded agency-related concepts' (Edmonds 2019, 208) necessary to address the 'persistent gap between the discourse of childhood studies and arenas of practice and policy' (Punch 2016, 352). Child domestic workers and/or their parents are not ignorant of the abusive and exploitative tendencies involved in the work, and they do not passively accept their relative powerlessness or unequivocally conform to the helpless victim figure presented in popular narratives; rather, they actively consider the risks of the work against the benefits.

Conclusion

Children's involvement in domestic service in third-party households is characterised by many complexities. By concentrating on children's perceptions of their work situations and their employers, the paper has attempted to disprove some of the dominant claims about the experiences of child domestic workers and show the inappropriateness of rescue policies that undermine their agency or the constraints around them. However, the paper is not merely a critique of dominant accounts of child domestic work, but a novel contribution to the field of agency especially in relation to children and youth studies. By exploring passive agency and how it is exercised in the context of harsh socio-economic realities, it presents a more nuanced and contextual account of CDW.

For the poorest households, it is not a matter of being 'helpless victims' in the hands of traffickers and/or employers as child rescue campaigners claim; it is a matter of what alternatives are available to them to address their vulnerabilities and severe deprivation. Such children have always been 'victims' in a world of unequal opportunities and power relations as well as in societies where members strive to survive with poor infrastructures and little or no support from the state. For these participants, the bigger issue is their disadvantaged situation, rather than what they are doing – in this case child domestic work – to overcome the situation. As much as working in domestic service may be fraught with unpredictable outcomes, the choice to do so or otherwise is also dependent on individual's perception of the work as well as the alternatives available to them. However, in a society with widespread poverty, social exclusion, and huge disparity between the rich and the poor, as well as between urban and rural areas, the alternatives are rather limited. So, these individuals are forced to adopt a wide range of strategies to make the most of their situation. These strategies exemplify

forms of agency, and in this sense, even the idea of doing 'nothing' – to escape exploitative child domestic work – is agentic.

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