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"THEY DON'T REALLY CARE ABOUT US": SOCIAL ANALYSIS OF OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH HAZARDS OF SAWMILL WORKERS IN THE WOOD PROCESSING INDUSTRY IN BENIN CITY

UWAGBALE RAYMOND FRANCIS[1]
[1]Department of Social Work, University of Benin, Benin City
Raymond4saint@gmail.com. +2348068236211
&

OMORUYI KINGSLEY (PhD)[2]
[2]Department of Political Science, University of Benin, Benin City
comfort.omotruyi@yahoo.co.uk +2347066895119

Abstract

Despite the quest to survive, workers are face with erroneous job hazard that affect their health as well as their wellbeing. Sawmill workers mostly encounter occupational health hazard from employer negligence, competitiveness, poor policies and many other. This study examines occupational health hazards of sawmill workers in the wood processing industry in Benin City. Adopting a cross-sectional research design which involves sawmill workers across the 3 local government that make up Benin metropolis. 278 respondents were systematically sampled using both the qualitative (IDI) instrument and quantitative (Semi-structured questionnaire) instrument for data collection. Based on the findings, the study noted that the awareness level of health hazard associated with wood processing is high, hence it often reduces work performance. Prevalent among such hazards are; skin irritation, eye disorder, throat problem, asthma, chest pain and many others. Thirdly, the study discovered that workers are at their own mercy as they are not often provided safety during work. The study therefore advocates that policy on workers safety, health as well as insurance should be revisited and the workers properly appreciated and protected.

Keywords: Social Analysis, Occupational health hazards, Sawmill Workers, Wood Processing Industry, Benin City.

Introduction

Health and safety of workers are paramount to organizational goal and objective. Hence, although risks abound in every organization, pre-cautionary measures are prerequisite to organization advancement (Akinwale and Olasanya, 2016). Globally, occupation hazard among workers in recent times are usually fatal and sometimes left workers incapacitated. One of the most hazardous environment in sub-urban society is the sawmill where woods are process using obsoleted machine without protective equipment (Uwagbale, 2018). The wood furniture industries make substantial contribution to the social and economic development ofevery society producing products like beds, tables, chairs, window frames and roofing wood. Wood processing industries play a major role in promoting economic growth by the process of employment. World Health Organization (2001) affirmed that,in developing countries, as work is becoming increasingly mechanized, so as workers are now used as tools in the production process, putting their health and lives at risk.

Factors as poor remuneration, poor employer-employee relationship, competitiveness, no protective equipment, poor habitable environment, non-implementable policies as well as exposure to relatively high level of dust are impediments to achieving the full potential of employees in most developing society (Uwagbale, 2018). Busayo, Alabi, Moses and Loveth (2017) avow that a healthy workforce is vital to sustainable social and economic development of a nation by promoting high productivity and economic gain which are positive effects of work on health. Consequently, when workers are faced with one form of hazard in the work place, they tend to reduce the level of productivity as the prevalence of job and health hazards create a negative tone to productivity and performance. Olaoye (2013) affirmed that occupational hazards connote working conditions of a job that are prone to accidents; some of the accidents could lead to death or injury.

Occupational hazards are dangers to human health and wellbeing which are associated with specific occupations. While efforts are made to reduce hazards, these hazards remain present in the workplace by nature of the profession and man-made recklessness. Ofonime and Umoren (2018) sees the wood processing industry (Sawmill) as one of the industries faces with hideous task with high rate of job hazard. They perceived that it is the industry that is saddled with the act of processing raw wood into a more refined and usable form. There have been countless evidence of both avoidable and unavoidable job hazard occurrence in most sawmill in Nigeria, ranging from wood dust, nasal cavity, cough, eye irritation, bronchitis as well as other respiratory diseases (Siew, Kauppinen, Heikkila, and Pukkala, 2012; Alonso-Sardon, Chamorro, Hernandez-Garcia, *et al.* 2015; Osuchukwu, Osuchukwu, Eko, and Otareh, 2015; Agbana, Joshua, Daikwo, Metiboba, 2016; Adeoye, Adeomi, Adewole, Israel, Temitayo-Oboh, and Olarewaju, 2014).

Benin City is one of the states in the Rain forest that is rich in economic trees, and there have been stories of forest guard arresting illegal tree fellers as well as timber/log cutter whose duty is to fall trees for processing. It is also noted that the state is rich in availability of functional sawmill (Uwagbale, 2018). With the advent of modern technology and the acceptability with modern machine in the processing of raw wood, precautionary measure seems lacking and workers are thrown into constant injurious circle when the next minutes is unknown as it's concerning workers safety within the work environment. It also brings to note that the wood processing industry is one major hub of revenue to the nation and employment to her citizenry. Despite the wealth of available literature there is still room for further study on the prevalence of work hazard associated with occupation as well as health hazard among sawmill workers in Benin metropolis.

Objective of the study

1. To examine the level of awareness of occupational health hazards among sawmill workers in Benin City.
2. To identify the health challenges that are peculiar to sawmill workers in Benin City
3. To investigate if there are any forms of occupational health and safety practices among sawmills workers in Benin City.

Brief Literature Review

One of the viable industry that engages the citizen in her economic activities with a vast hub of revenue to the county is the wood processing industry, and sawmill are key concept when

it comes to wood processing (Uwagbale, 2018; Adeoye, Adeomi, Abodunrin, Olugbenga-Bello, Abdulsalam, 2015). Sociologically, man invasion with the physical environment has seen him exploring the forest and it produce one of which is the cash crop (economic trees) that is bring vast revenue /income to the country. Stratification in the conflict theorizing according to Marxian perspective have create a two dimension or classes of person (the Haves and the Have-not) (Ritzer, 2011). And the classification has often left the vulnerable groups (sawmill workers) expose to various hazard without options (such as making health decisions) that should affect them (Osagbemi, La-Kadri, and Aderibigbe,2010).

Occupational health is concerned with the control of occupational health hazards that arise as a result of or during work activities. Occupation hazard has become a recurring reality in the face of present day society, and the awareness among employees are often taken with levity or without caution. This has created partial or in most cases total deformity to employees and fatality is at its highest in recent time (Uwagbale, 2015). Suffice to say that sawmill worker are one of the worst hit in this line of duty as stated in (www.careerplanner.com.)

> "A sawmill worker duties includes: unloads logs from trucks or lorries, roll logs onto sawmill deck, examines logs for defects such as embedded pieces of iron or stone and marks defects for removal, rolls logs from deck onto log or carriage, rides log carriage of head saw and adjusts position of logs on carriage to cut planks of required thickness, sorts and guides planks emerging from saw onto roller tables or conveyors for trimming edges, straightens lumber on moving conveyors, straightens edges of rough lumber, using saw, sharpens and adjusts teeth of wood working saws"

Often time due to poor policy implementation, negligence on the employer and fear of losing one's job (employee), the sawmill workers are often not aware of the danger of not protecting themselves and their health (Adeoye, Adeomi, Abodunrin, Olugbenga-Bello, and Abdulsalam, 2015; Abel, 2008). Adeoye et al (2015) affirmed that accidents are prone to occur and its gravity depends on many factors. Hence, workers are often not too interested in guarding themselves for the minor occupational hazard and negligence, fear, inexperience, job laxity are often link to the major occupational hazard.

Uwagbale, (2015) affirmed that there are various types of hazard, and they ranges from; Safety Hazards which involves unguarded machinery and moving machinery parts; guards removed or moving parts that a worker can accidentally touch, working from heights e.g. ladders, scaffolds, roofs, or any raised work area, Electrical hazards e.g. frayed cords, missing ground pins, improper wiring and Machinery-related hazards (lockout/tag out, boiler safety, forklifts, etc.). Protective gadget are available for employees, but the non-usage during working hour calls for concern and this has created consciousness not only on the individual as a worker but also employees whose concern is beyond the immediate environment considering the idea of class consciousness (Marxian perspective) (Ritzer, 2011).

Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional and descriptive research design which seeks to make use of a mixed method of data collection and analysis for 278 respondents selected using a multi-stage (Purposive, Cluster, Simple Random and Convenience) sampling technique in arriving

at the desired respondent. For the qualitative instrument for data collection the In-depth interview guide was utilized and for the quantitative instrument, the semi-structured questionnaire was adopted for the study. Quantitative data was analyzed using descriptive statistics which includes frequency and simple percentage and the qualitative data was contently analyzed following a thematic structure.

Findings

Table 1: Socio-demographic characteristics of the respondents (N=278)

Age		
Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
18 – 20 years	20	7.2
21 – 30 years	105	37.7
31 – 40 years	103	37.1
41 – 50 years	38	13.7
51 years and above	12	4.3
Sex		
Male	255	91.7
Female	23	8.3
Marital Status		
Single	190	68.3
Married	88	31.7
Educational level		
Primary Education	67	24.1
Secondary Education	124	44.6
Vocational/Technical	44	15.8
Tertiary Education	43	15.5
Religious affiliation		
Christianity	154	55.4
Islam	89	32.0
African Traditional Religion	35	12.6

Discussion of table 1

Result from the table above shows that majority of the respondents are between ages 21-30 years and 31-40 years of age as they make up 37.7% and 37.1% of the entire respondents. 13.7% of the respondents are within ages 41-50 years and the least among the respondents are respondents that are above 51 years as they constitute 4.3%. On the sex of the respondents, the result shows that there are more male respondents (91.7%) than the female respondents (31.7%), on the education status, the result shows that 24.1% of the respondents have primary education, 44.6% of the entire respondents have secondary education; while the respondents with vocational and tertiary education constitute 15.8% and 15.5% respectively. Last on the table is the religious affiliation of the respondents, the result shows that majority of the respondents are Christians as they make up 55.4% and the Muslims 32%. While the least among the respondents are the African Traditional religion worshippers with 12.6%.

Table 2: Examines the level of awareness of occupational health hazards among sawmill workers in Benin City.(N=278)

Have you heard of word hazard		
Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
Yes	183	65.8
No	95	34.2
Are you aware of the health hazard associated with your occupation		
Yes	156	56.1
No	74	26.6
Not sure	48	17.3
Which of the health hazard do you think is prevalent in your sawmill		
Physical (loud noise, wood dust etc.)	102	36.7
Biological (insect bite, bacteria & viruses)	46	16.5
Chemical (Pesticide, explosive chemical)	69	24.8
Others (Mechanical, work & Ergonomic)	61	22.0
Do you agree that occupational health hazards can reduce working performance of sawmill workers		
Strongly disagree	10	3.7
Disagree	14	5.0
Not sure	56	20.1
Agree	87	31.3
Strongly agree	111	39.9

Implication of table 2

From the table above it is obvious that majority of the respondents who are sawmill workers knows what hazard is as they constitute 65.8% of the entire respondents and only 34.2% of the entire respondents claimed ignorance. On the awareness associated with health hazard on occupation of sawmill workers, 56.1% of the respondents agreed that they are aware, 26.6% said they were not aware and 17.3% were indifferent with their response. On the kind of hazard prevalent with the occupational hazard of sawmill workers, 36.7% of the respondents claimed physical hazard, 24.8% of the entire respondents claimed chemical hazard, 22% of the respondents claimed a combination of others hazard ranging from mechanical, ergonomic and work hazard. The least among them was the biological hazard which includes insect bites, bacteria and viruses with 16.5%. However, majority of the respondents agreed to the assertion that occupational health hazards can reduce working performance of sawmill workers as they constitute 71.2% of the entire respondents and 8.7% of the respondents disagreed. On the respondents that were indifferent, they make up 20.1%. In support of the data, a respondent said:

> Before joining the sawmill workers, most of us were introduce to the hazard involved and also the financial benefit especially when there are embargo in the Bush by the government, or there is scarcity of wood when the demand is high. We know there are hazard and this is usually risky, therefore we try to take caution (**IDI- Sawmill worker-Oredo-2022**).

Another respondent said:

> The health hazard as well as occupational hazard involved with sawmill work is clear and everyone knows of them. But the financial benefit as a worker sometimes makes us ignore the preventive hazard which is often injurious to sawmill workers. This makes us most times loss workers and reduces productivity. (**IDI- Sawmill worker- Egor-2022**).

Table 3: Identify the health challenges that are peculiar to sawmill workers in Benin City (N=278)

Are there challenges peculiar with sawmill workers in Benin city		
Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
Yes	268	96.4
no	10	3.6
What are the challenges peculiar with sawmill workers		
Skin Irritation	44	15.8
Eye disorder	40	14.4
Chest pain	35	12.6
Asthma	32	11.5
Nose Irritation	35	12.6
Throat problem	42	15.1
Breathing problem	41	14.7
Nothing	9	3.2
How often do you experience these health challenges		
Always	112	40.3
Occasionally	98	35.3
Rarely	55	19.8
Never	13	4.7

Implication of table 3

The result from the table above examines the challenges faced by sawmill workers, from the table it is obvious that majority of the respondents affirmed that there are challenges peculiar to sawmill workers as 96.4% of the respondents constitute those that agreed and only 3.6% of the respondents disagreed. On the challenges faced 15.8% claimed to have skin irritation, 14.4% (eye disorder), chest pain make up 12.6%, asthma (11.5%) and nose irritation make up 12.6%. others are throat problem 15.1%, breathing problem constitute 14.7% of the entire challenges named, while 3.2% of the respondents said nothing. On the frequency of the challenges faced/experienced by sawmill workers 40.3% of the respondents claimed that they always experience the challenges, while 35.3% said occasionally, 19.8% said rarely and only 4.7% of the entire respondents said never. In support of the above finding, a respondent said;

> The challenges faced by sawmill workers are obvious, common among them are skin and nose irritation as a result of wood dust, chest pain and breathing problem. Only on rare cases that we had one of us who had cancer. "*My brother e no easy that is the plain truth*" (**IDI-Sawmill worker-Ikpoba-Okha-2022**).
> Other respondents affirmed that

> We dey suffer for this work oh! There is no day we no dey hear of our colleague wey go hospital for check-up of visit chemist for regular drugs. Most of us dey treat chest pain regularly, catarrh, Apollo (eye pain) due to wood dust or insect. I just tire, but I no get choice (**IDI-Sawmill worker-Egor-2022**).
>
> ***Translation***
> We are really suffering, we hear of our colleagues who visit the hospital on regular basis for medical check-up or get to chemist to get drugs. The most common challenges are chest pain, catarrh, conjunctivitis as a result of wood dust and insect from wood. I am really exhausted but have no choice (**IDI-Sawmill worker-Egor-2022**).

Table 4: Investigates if there are any forms of occupational health and safety practices among sawmill workers in Benin City. (**N=278**)

Are there modalities in place by management to checkmate health and safety practices among sawmill workers		
Response	**Frequency**	**Percentage (%)**
Yes	215	77.3
No	63	22.7
Are there first aid facilities, canteen, bathroom and toilets available for sawmill workers		
Yes	97	34.9
No	181	65.1
Are the modalities put in place duly followed by management(sawmill owners)		
Yes	88	31.7
No	190	68.3
State the reason for the above option		
Ethnicity	67	24.1
Nepotism (Man know Man)	124	44.6
Nothing	87	31.3

Implication of table 4

The result from the above table shows that 77.3% of the entire respondents agreed that there modalities in place by management to checkmate health and safety practices among sawmill workers and 22.7% of the respondents disagreed to the above assertion. The result further shows that majority of the respondents disagreed to the assertion that there are first aid facilities, canteen, bathroom and toilets available for sawmill workers as they constitute 65.1% of the entire respondents and only 34.9% of the respondent agreed. From the result it 68.3% of the entire respondents affirmed that the modalities duly put in place are not duly followed and the 31.7% stated otherwise. On the reason for the above, Ethnicity and Nepotism are stated as the major reason for the neglect.

Conclusion and recommendations

It is affirmative to state that the hazard associated with wood processor (sawmill) workers cannot be quantified. Despite the fact that there are regulations guiding its operation and the preventive measure ought to have been in place. The reality is that there have been a nonchalant attitude toward the daily operation of it activities mostly on the side of the workers

as against the sawmill owners. The most prevalent of all the hazard are the physical hazard, this is due to the fact that that is what is visible to all. However, the biological, chemical and others are often fatal as a result of negligence on the part of sawmills owners and the operators (workers). An action that could be prevented by taking precautionary measure in other to save lives, increase productivity, ensure safety and ensure effectiveness on the side of the operation by workers. It is on this backdrop that the study advocates that;

1. The policy guiding sawmill operation should be strictly adhered to as the full implementation of monitoring should be properly enacted by the government to ensure the safety of lives (the sawmill workers especially) which is one of the principle function of the government.
2. Government to penalize defaulters that operate without license and preventive gadget in its daily operation as this will act as a deterrent to further intending defaulters.
3. Saw mill workers should be given insurance that will protect their future should the unforeseen happens, as the insurance will give them leverage in a lifetime as it is practice in developed clan in the world
4. Workers should be properly remunerated as a way of being appreciated and protected. This will ensure that the workers properly taken care of for effectiveness and efficiency in work-place.
5. There should be consciousness among operator/workers of sawmill whose life is always at risk in the daily operation of machines. As they should stand their ground against reckless sawmill owners and create a force that will ensure a formidable operations for the proper implementation of the proper modalities put in place for a better work environment.
6. Community leaders should ensure that sawmill operators create the ideal environment for her operation by doing regular inspection as a negation of this will affect not only her indigenes but also citizenry that earn a living through the pay from the workplace.

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