

# **Child Abuse and Its Implications for Sustainable Development in Nigeria**

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## **ABSTRACT**

*The menace of child abuse has remained a challenge to the development of the child and the country. This has consequential implications on the sustainable development of the country in entirety. Nigeria as a nation has an estimated fifteen million children engaged in one manual labour or another and this negatively impacts the development of the populace and society in general. This paper has identified child labour, physical abuse, child neglect, child marriage, female genital mutilation, molestation and emotional and psychological abuse as types of abuse and established that poverty, cultural and religious belief, poor implementation of child protective regulations as factors encouraging the propagation of these condemnable acts particularly in developing countries like Nigeria. The paper stress that children are the future generation and hold the key to development as leaders of tomorrow as such, how they are tackled by every society reflects the level of development of any country as such, importance must be placed on tackling this menace quickly. The study amongst a number of measures recommends that qualified persons be employed to handle the affairs of children to prevent exploitation, molestation and neglect, government should establish more orphanage homes as well as finance aid non-governmental organizations financially in their quest to enlighten, rehabilitate and empower victims and children, in addition, NGOs should provide accurate data on victims and perpetrators of these acts.*

**Key words:** *Child Abuse, Development, Sustainable Development*

## **Introduction**

Over years, every society has continuously been challenged by cases of child abuse. Although the form of abuse has changed over time, these continuous cases of child abuse have implications on the sustainable development of the child and the country in general. The repercussion of this abuse on sustainable development suggests that the perpetuation of these hideous acts denies the child the pleasure of developing at his/her expected rate of growth but rather is forced to experience mental, emotional and physical challenges.

In Nigeria this, child abuse has continued to be a menace in every society and this can be attributed to the economic situation that has seen families compromise the future of their children in a bid to survive as well as the failure of legal means established by the government to protect children (Bass, 2004)

This indicates that the regulations that have been setup to guard children are not effective which tends to impact the sustainable development of the child as well as the implication it has on the economy of the country.

Proponents highlight that the Nigerian constitution of 1999 guarantee certain basic rights to children although there is no differentiation between the rights of children and that of adults however, they (Nigerian citizens) are supposed to enjoy these privileges and rights (Iguh & Nosike, 2011). According to Olusegun & Idowu (2016) these rights include: “the right of life, the right to dignity of the human person, the right to a fair hearing, the right to conscience and religion, the right to peaceful assembly as well as the right of association and freedom of movement”. Particularly, under section 17 (3) (f) children ought to be guarded against mistreatment and moral and material neglect. Furthermore, section 18 (1) offers that the government ought to make sure that its policies offer equal and sufficient opportunities for education at any point in time. According to Matrimonial Causes Act Cap 220, 2010 Section 71 (1) “in proceeding with respect to the custody, guardianship, welfare, advancement or education of children of a marriage, the court shall regard the interest of these children as the paramount consideration”.

Upon taking into careful consideration, the High Court looking at the best interest of the child will consider a number of factors which includes: the age, the wishes of the child, the sex of the child as well as emotional and medical factors. In addition, Section 70 of the MCA grants on the court a suitable application, the power to make orders for two types of maintenance namely maintenance per se and maintenance pending the disposal of proceedings in favor of a spouse or children of the marriage. The African Charter on the rights and welfare of the child 1999 additionally, offers that child ought to be guarded from every form of torture, mental, physical or sexual abuse or any treatment that is degrading or neglective in nature (Owolabi, 2012). The Child Right Acts of 2003 stipulates that children must be guarded against child betrothal, child marriages, unlawful sexual intercourse, child labor, unlawful custody and narcotics use (UNICEF, 2007). Nonetheless, in spite of the numerous provisions which have been placed to guard the rights of children they still faces all forms of discrimination, abuse, cruelty, violence to mention but a few (Nwokoro & Burchi, 2011).

Scholars have highlighted that the rise in child abuse in Nigeria can be linked to the adoption of the structural adjustment programme in the late 1980s by the Nigerian Government (Okafor, 2010). This economic policy though intended to boost the economy lead to the devaluation of the currency of the country and a subsequent slide in economic performance, standard and quality of life amongst Nigerians. This rise in poverty affected the ability and capability of citizens to be attain education, feed themselves as a result of rise in poverty and unemployment as well as protect their children from abuse thereby encouraging child labour, early child marriage, kidnapping and emotional and mental abuse (Okafor & Amayo, 2006; Okafor, 2010; Mahato & Dhakal, 2015). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight the importance of parents being present in the development of a child as they have a say in determining if the

child will experience abuse. Proponents opine that parents should create opportunities to spend time with their child so as to offer them guidance and supervise their actions and decisions. As such, parents need to train and educate their wards and not be reliant on only the formal educational system of education. Children ought to be taught about the dangers that conversing with strangers portend and the need to be cautious and vigilant even amongst people they are familiar with (Olusegun & Idowu, 2016).

It is estimated that 218 million kids aged between the ages of 5 and 17 across the world are engaged in child labour in one form or another and this expose them to hazardous chemicals, working conditions and accidental that is detrimental to the mental and physical development of a child (UNICEF, 2008).

According to a report, the population of people living in poverty is 650 million children whereas, about 130 million children do not have access to education. This according to Rapatsa (2016) has devastating implications for sustainable development of the country. Furthermore, it is estimated that about 250 million children are engaged in labour across the world (Okafor, 2010).

Scholars are of the opinion that this abuse of the child is detrimental to the development of the society (Bass, 2004; Oloko, 2004). They opine that culture, religious, poverty and low socio-economic status to mention a few are factors that influence the perpetuation of this acts. These determinant account for Asia and Africa having more than 90 percent of the child employment in the world (Rau, 2002; Ruwanpura and Rai, 2004; Okafor, 2010).

## **The Concept of Child Abuse**

The meaning of child abuse has generated various definitions. According to (Safiyyah, 2017) child abuse is the psychological, physical or sexual abuse or exploitation of a child or group of children particularly by a parent or caretaker. Oloko (2004) child abuse is the act or failure to react on the part of a parent or caretaker on events that may lead to death, devastating psychological, mental or physical abuse or exploitation. Child abuse can also be referred to carrying out something or failure to do something that result in harm to a child or puts a child at risk of harm (Gupta & Aggarwal, 2012). It refers to any action that is emotionally, physically, socially or morally harmful and dangerous to the child and has the potential to interfere with their education. As such, child abuse comprises any form of mental or physical maltreatment, sexual exploitation or negligent attitude for commercial or exploitative reasons that lead or have the potential to impact the health, development or self-esteem of the abused with regard to the relationship between the guardian and child.

## **Sustainable Development**

Sustainable development is developed on the ideologies of human rights that is structured on regard for self-esteem and worth of human beings that seek to guarantee freedom from fear and want. It seeks to magnify the choices of everyone regardless of being male, female or a child in present and future generations whilst safeguarding the natural systems that everything relies upon. Sustainable development seeks the needs of the present without jeopardizing the capability of the future generations to meet their

needs (Anderson, 2002). According to Owolabi (2012) it is the establishing ontop of the past for a better today without handicapping the prospects of the future.

Therefore, sustainable development comprises anything that nature and humanity needs to maintain existence presently and futuristically. In order for sustainable development to happen in any country, the value system of the citizenry ought to be one which encourages an excellent social process with regard to political and economical participation in terms of allocation of resource. It ought to be regarded as a broad concept that inculcates apprehensions for jobs, the surrounding and the economy. According to Sciberras (2015) it embodies integration, comprehension and acting on the complication links that exist between the society, environment as well as the economy.

## Categories of Child Abuse

1. **Child Neglect:** Child neglect has been described as “a failure to provide basic needed care for the child such as shelter, food, clothing, education, supervision, medical care and other basic necessities needed for the child’s physical, intellectual and emotional development” (Olusegun & Idowu, 2016). There are numerous categories of neglect which include; medicinal, mental and intellectual. Neglected children tend to have intellectual, physical, social, emotional and growth challenges. They are usually withdrawn, experience malnutrition and susceptible to numerous fatalities due to the lack of “caregivers” at critical moments.
2. **Female Genital Mutilation:** This practice is entrenched into the traditions and cultural beliefs which has been a way of life for several years. Female genital mutilation according to the World Health Organisation (WHO) is a “procedure that involves partial or complete removal of the female external genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons” (WHO, 2014). This practice has proved difficult to eradicate as a result of the belief that FGM enhances pleasure for men, discourages promiscuity, enhances fertility and fosters cleanliness (Okeke et al, 2012). All forms of FGM have immediate health implications for the bearer. This is according to a report by UNICEF, which highlights that the pain and infection the child is exposed to as a result of the cutting of the nerves and sensitive genital tissues can lead to shock, uncontrollable bleeding and in worse case scenarios death (Olusegun & Idowu, 2016). Reisel & Creighton (2015) highlights that the long term complications of FGM include: infertility, urinary challenges, genital scarring, obstetric complications as well as psychological effects.
3. **Child Labour:** This refers to any form of physical activity that has the potential to impact on the health and moral development of a child as well as expose them to risk. Child labour can be referred to as any work that is mentally, physically, socially or morally harmful to kids as well as any activity that deprives the child the chance to attain education. Some of these kids are most involved in agriculture and are charged with planting, clearing, picking the crops as well as tending to the livestock. In urban areas they work as shoe shiners, brick carriers, drug peddlers and vendors (Adeyemo, 2016).

4. **Emotional and Psychological Abuse:** This abuse refers to the continuous mental maltreatment of a child that impact severely on the mental and emotional development of the child. Scholars have highlighted that emotionally maltreated and maligned children are exposed to attitudes and behaviors that have undesirable impacts or are deprived of the love, care and affection they require and as such they are mentally distressed based on social as well as scientific standards (Kara, 2004). Gervis (2012) postulates that child who experience constant humiliation, rejection and shaming in most cases view themselves as useless and not capable of being a success.
5. **Kidnapping:** This involves the “unlawful detention of a person or group of persons by force or cohesion within an undisclosed location most times to get ransom. Scholars have identified the impact kidnapping has on victims and family members mentally and emotionally (Ebigbo, 2003; Olusegun & Idowu (2016). Kidnapping violates the rights of the victims to freedom of movement and exposes them to inhuman and degrading treatments. Olusegun and Idowu (2016) identify that kidnapping can be classified into kidnapping for the purpose of extortion, kidnapping for religious, political or ideological purpose, kidnapping for the purpose of sexual exploitation and kidnapping as a result of family disputes.
6. **Physical Abuse:** This refers to “the non-accidental application of physical force towards a child that causes harm to the child.” it encompasses subjecting the child to inhuman circumstances, physical torture under the excuse of correction or anger. It may result in either permanent or temporal damage to bones, brain, tissue or organs.
7. **Molestation:** This refers to the employment of force or enticement to carry out sexual activities with a child. postulates that the child may or may not be aware of the reasons behind these activities and may involve physical or non-physical contact activities comprising of rubbing, kissing as well as fondling with a child genitals, inappropriate conversations with a child regarding sexual exploits and activities. Scholars have highlighted that lifelong implication of these activities varies in symptoms.

## Impact of Child abuse on Sustainable Development

Due to economic situations, children are being increasingly been sent out by their guardians to hawk, work as domestic servants, vulcanizers, welders for example, with a view to contributing to the income generated by the family (Tade, 2010). Piler (2004) postulates by saying that parents have an obligation to provide an enabling and safe environment for their kids in order to facilitate personal growth and wellbeing. However, the negligent attitude of parents has allowed children to be easily abused, particularly sexual abuse. Guardians that send their female children on errands during late period of the day, give them goods to hawk, abandon them in the hands of housemaids for several hours or allow them freedom to choose their clothing and way of living expose them to the risk of being abused by pedophiles. As this negligence and

in some cases deliberate act has detrimental effects on the personal growth of these kids and has the potential to jeopardize sustainable development being that children are the future of any nation.

In addition, as a result of this predicament that sees the child abused by working at a tender age, the children are exposed to possible accidents, harmful individuals such as pedophiles, kidnappers and drug peddlers. Ebigbo (2006) opines that child abuse acts such as child trafficking has seen children engage in underage sex, thereby exposing to the child to the risk of sexually transmitted diseases. This consequently poses a threat to the sustainable development of any country because the increase in prevalence of STDs for children has the potential to reduce the average life expectancy of that society thereby disrupting sustainable development. According to Olaitan & Amos (2016) parents also marry off their daughters at an early age in most cases to improve the economic conditions of the family without considering the impact it will have on the child emotionally and physically in terms of early child bearing, dropping out of school and impaired development. physically abused children experience various undesired consequences, ranging from soft tissue injuries to death from unknown causes, loss in memory, growth retardation, speech delay, social withdrawal, limited friends and peer relationship, academic challenges, suicidal tendencies as well as interpersonal cognitive, emotional and behavioral problems (Ebigbo, 2006; Okafor, 2010). As such, it can be deduced that as a result of child abuse acts such as child labour, child trafficking, female genital mutilation, prostitution, child marriage and parental negligence to mention a few exposes children to STDs, deportation, rape, poor living standards, illiteracy academic failure, drug abuse, suicidal tendencies and trafficking as well as crime and these have serious developmental impacts on the society such as increase in crime rate, strain on the health sector, unqualified youths, low income per capita and poor national image to mention but a few.

## **Factor Affecting the Effectiveness of Laws on Child Abuse**

In spite of the numerous legal instruments employed both internationally and national to prevent the abuse of children, children continuously face numerous forms of child abuse. This can be linked to a number of factors which include:

- Inefficient Implementation of Laws and policies

There are a number of laws and policies that have been stipulated to protect and guide issues relating to child abuse. Nevertheless, laws are only effective in situations where they appropriately imposed and effected by the relevant bodies. Poor implementation has caused a “wide gap” in the objectives and outcomes which is a mockery of the enacted regulations and policies. In the case of Nigeria, this can be partly attributed to the non-adoption of the Child Rights Act of 2003 (CRA) by all states in the federation. Ojo (2014) opines that in states that passed the CRA, insufficient commitment has been shown by relevant bodies in the implementation of its provision and this has consequently encouraged the propagation of this menace of children.

This can be linked to the financial burden that will be required to enforce the provisions of CRA. In order for the CRA to be implemented CRA effortlessly and effectively, the provision of facilities such as schools and court facilities as well as manpower which include; magistrates, law enforcement officers states, employees of non-governmental agencies and judges will have to undergo training regarding child

protection laws, processes and the appropriate channels to seek redress. Scholars opine that there also operational bottlenecks that are associated or experienced in obtaining justice through the judicial system in situations when the guardians are the culprits of these abuse. This is as a result of the fact that the child is dependent on their guardians for judicial relied as such cannot take any legal action themselves. In addition, the duration and time constraints associated with a litigation process deter people from speaking up and reporting cases of abuse (Mishra, 2000; Ercelewa and Nauman, 2001; Piler, 2004 and Owolabi, 2012; Olusegun & Idowu, 2016). According to Olusegun & Idowu (2016) justice may fail to be gotten through the process of judicial process due to technicalities which sometimes lead to the offender winning the case. These therefore does not discourage offenders from carrying out abuse as a result of the fact that due to numerous technicalities which include insufficient evidence, there is an assumption that the can get away with any action they take.

- Lack of Awareness

It is notable that abuse towards children has continued to be rampant this can be linked under reporting by victims and families of victims. According to Abamara (2016) this under-reporting stems from lack of awareness that has encouraged by certain cultural beliefs and practices that infringe on the rights of the child and consequently encourage abuse. Ojo (2014) proposes that a significant number of persons in the society are unaware that this cultural practices are infringements on the rights of the child and seen as abuse as a result of the cultural acceptance of this practice. Buttressing this view Owolabi (2012) establishes that numerous cultural beliefs and practices that are harmful to children particularly girls have been practiced over time. For instance, female genital mutilations, early child marriage, tribal marks, tattoos which are seen as a part of their culture and practice. Hence, it must be highlighted that cultural justification of numerous abuse that are linked with cultural practices and the sheer unwillingness of victims in this case children, to speak out concerning the abuse they have experienced has proved endemic to the sustainable development of the child and the nation at large.

## **Strategies to address abusiveness of the child for economic development**

Scholars across the world have agreed that children are the future leaders of tomorrow (Power, Serle & Willmot, 2011; Agu, 2013). As such, how they are handled will determine the level of advancement of any country. Child abuse therefore needs to be tackled swiftly before the implications become uncontrollable. Eze (2013) highlights that, child abuse must be handled through the enforcement of regulations, policies and enlightenment and empowerment. In addition, extra effort should be put in to safe guard children from genital mutilation, child labour, neglect, molestation, child marriages as well as other forms of abuse. To guaranteed effectiveness of these regulations as well as reduce the prevalence of issues surrounding child abuse which include corruption, poverty, cultural attitudes, poor enforcement of regulations as well as attitude of guardians need to be looked at.

It must however, be highlighted that public awareness is essential with regard to regulations surrounding child abuse, its implications and the requirements of compliance. Regulations encouraging child abuse in whatever scenario ought to revised to set solid basics for the fight against child abuse (Badoe, 2017).

Guardian, schools and non-governmental organizations should collaborate as efforts of the government will not produce results if other stakeholders are not included or not in collaboration.

## **Conclusion**

This paper recognizes that children are the future of any nation and if any objective nation is determined to develop and advance there must be provisions in place to protect and encourage the development of these citizens. However, it highlights that child abuse poses a serious developmental and health challenge for countries across the world and has seen an increase in the population of children experiencing one form of abuse or another which range from child labour, kidnapping, molestation, sexual exploitation to mention but a few. This abuse has caused them to develop withdrawal tendencies and attitudinal challenges that may be permanent or temporal thereby endangering the sustainable development of the child and society they find themselves. This paper further highlights that, the legislations and laws introduced to protect the rights of the child have faced challenges in implementation as a result of factors such as lack of awareness, financial constraints, cultural beliefs.

This paper concludes therefore that for any well-meaning country to experience sustainable development there is need for issues surrounding child abuse to be tackled urgently in order to reverse the ugly trend of child abuse.

## **Recommendations**

- Efforts should be made to establish more and better equipped orphanages and homes for children to safeguard homeless children and orphans while showing them sufficient affection and attention.
- Qualified and experienced employees should be employed to take charge of the affairs of the kids to curb maltreatment, negligence, exploitation.
- Government should encourage NGOs by financially assisting them in raising awareness through building capacity, abuse and rehabilitation centers, empowerment programmes such as vocational training.
- NGOs should encourage and collaborate with relevant authorities particularly the government in providing substantial data, information and ideas on how to tackle child abuse menace.

The National and states house of assembly should review the child right act legislation with a view to curbing child abandonment and abuse.

- The living standards of the citizens should be improved so as to discourage child labour and child marriages.



- Sensitization campaigns should be carried out to enlighten the populace on the impact and effect of child abuse and negligence.
- Children should be educated on safety strategies to employ to detect and avoid pedophiles and kidnappers.
- Stiffer penalties should be introduced for abuses with a view to deterring future perpetrators.

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