

Public Perceptions of Child Protection in Nigeria: The Crucial Role of Child Protection Social Workers

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Abstract

Children's welfare and safety are fundamental rights but are often compromised due to various socio-economic factors. Thus, there is a need to understand child protection in Nigeria and the crucial role of Child Protection Social Workers to accommodate the best interests of the child to local contexts. This study examines the perceptions of a cross-section of Nigerians regarding their knowledge of child protection and the roles of social work professionals. Through a structured questionnaire, data were collected from a representative sample of 150 participants between the age of 25 years and above who have child(ren) residing with them. The data were analyzed using SPSS version 21. The result show that the general knowledge level of child protection in the modern Nigerian context is low (48.00) compared to the traditional or cultural Nigerian method. Although the majority of the respondents (51.5%) were not familiar with the professional designation 'Child Protection Social Worker', they, however, demonstrated substantial knowledge about social workers' general areas of practice (82.5%) with low level of knowledge of social work roles (43.5%) on Child Protection. It was thus recommended that the government, non-governmental organizations, philanthropist, social workers among others should work to ensure that the issue of Child Protection in modern Nigeria be highly prioritized.

Keywords: Child Protection, Public Perceptions, Nigeria, Role, Social Workers

Introduction

Globally, child protection remains a significant concern with Nigeria being no exception. The purpose of protecting a child could be regarded as universal because the child, as a human being, needs to be protected. According to Oyero, (2010), the Article 2 of Children and Young Persons Act (CYPA) that was enacted in some regions of Nigeria refers to a child as a person within the age bracket 0-4 years old.

In 2003, the Child Rights Act was enacted which mandate the establishment of legislation encompassing all children's rights and obligations and unifies all child-related laws into one piece of legislation (Iguh & Nosike, 2011). This provision has been entrenched by Section 1 of the Child Rights Act in Nigerian law, which provides that "in every action concerning a child, whether undertaken by an individual, public or private body, institutions of service, court of law, or administrative or legislative authority, the best interest of the child shall be the primary consideration".

Although, there is no universally accepted definition of child protection, the Save the Children UK (2010) refers to child protection as a specific legal and institutional arrangements addressing child violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. Child protection refers to efforts that aim to keep children safe from harm. The term “child protection” is used by United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) to mean preventing and responding to violence, exploitation and abuse against children. Meanwhile, child protection is becoming more widely understood by humanitarian organizations to include mitigating and preventing all forms of child abuse, exploitation, violence, and injury (Wessels, & Edgerton, 2008).

It is widely known that the coexistence of certain traditional laws, religious laws, and the inherited English legal system is allowed under the legal pluralism of the Nigerian legal system (Foua & Diriwari, 2020). Foua and Diriwari (2020) stated that one of the main obstacles to the efficient application and enforcement of child protection measures is the differences in perspectives between traditional settings and modern Nigeria, where the rule of law should be paramount.

The traditional Nigerian in their diverse ethnic groups have a unique understanding of child protection. While the modern child protection standards often clash with the traditional beliefs regarding child-rearing practices like witchcraft accusations, corporal punishment, and child marriage. Thus, the public perceptions of child protection are shaped by a multitude of factors, including cultural beliefs, religious practices, and experiences with government agencies.

The child is placed at the bottom of the social hierarchy in the traditional Nigerian perception of obedience and respect for adults being paramount. Secker (2013) views supported this as stated that indeed traditional social stratification within southern Nigeria accords children the lowest social status. However, early respect and observance of children's rights will undoubtedly help them reach their full potential and become engaged members of society.

Foua and Diriwari (2020) posit that there is a consensus that children in Nigerian culture should receive the highest level of protection from society at large, regardless of the topic being discussed be it child abuse, child cruelty, child labor, or child trafficking. There is a need to protect the child irrelevant of what is perceived by traditional settings, cultural or customary values and the constraint of development.

Amidst these complexities, child protection social workers play a pivotal role in safeguarding the rights and well-being of vulnerable children. Isangha, Yinka, Akintunde, Choi, and Lin (2023) stated that Nigerian child protection social workers are primarily responsible for providing essential remedial services such as food, clothing, shelter and counselling/therapeutic services. Child protection social workers have initial discussions with family members to learn about their viewpoints on issues and possible solutions, assisting them in attending child protection case conferences, taking into account the views of both parents and children, and being aware of the various ways that family members communicate, including the ways in which information is conveyed and official reports are prepared (Alsadi, et al., 2022).

Statement of the problem

Child protection issues are a key concern in Nigeria, but important gaps exist in relation to national policy on social assistance provision for children. Although child protection is one of four key pillars of the national social protection strategy, the strategy is poorly resourced and implemented. The Nigerian child protection deficits revolve round child labour, violence against children within the home environment and child trafficking as well as rape (Eyang, Gobo, Iwuagwu & Ogar, 2020, Jones, Presler-Marshall, Cooke & Akinrimisi, 2012). According to (Nwanyanwu & Anumba 2023),

child trafficking has preyed on Nigerian children in different forms and has been a major social ill in the contemporary world. These trafficked children are significantly more prone to be exploited, have lower educational attainment, and are more likely to be engaged in force labour.

According to the United Nations' Child Right Act, children in northern Nigeria are subjected to socio-cultural practices that put their lives at peril and breach their rights (Popoola, & Idonije, 2023). In the current world, children are not usually sufficiently safeguarded against a wide range of threats (Man, Barth, Li & Wang, 2017). Children typically make up half of a population and have unique vulnerabilities that differ based on their gender and developmental stage. According to Wessels and Edgerton (2008), even though the international definition of a child is anyone under the age of 18, individuals between the ages of 0 and 18 face a variety of protection hazards based on their developmental stage.

Just over one billion children, or more than half of all children worldwide, live in developing nations where they suffer from one or more severe kinds of deprivation of basic human needs (Shimelis, 2011). With the current Nigeria's economic situation in Nigeria, a large number of children live in extreme poverty. Ngwu, Ogbuke, and Ofoegbu, (2020) stated that children in Nigeria often face many problems such as poor health, lack of access to quality education, food and social insecurity, and lack of care. Working often long hours in semi-formal and informal businesses, they are frequently exposed to dangerous and unhealthy environments for little pay (Jones, Presler-Marshall, Cooke & Akinrimisi, 2012).

There are more vulnerable youngsters than ever before as a result of the economy's rapid expansion and societal structural changes brought about by factors including family dissolution and widespread migration to cities (Man & Wang, 2016). Despite the fact that the government has released a number of laws and policies, until recently there was no complete and unified legislation pertaining to child welfare or child protection.

The high prevalence of moral decay and disregard for conventional values is perhaps a byproduct of the numerous illegal actions that take place in society (Ngwu, Ogbuke, & Ofoegbu, 2020). Children in areas where there is armed conflict suffer a variety of threats due to the fact that these hazards are so varied and compound pre-existing, long-term problems including destitution, prejudice, and hunger (Wessels, & Edgerton, 2008). Some existing child protection program serve more vulnerable and disadvantaged children rather than abused and neglected children (Man, Barth, Yue-e Li, & Wang, 2017). According to Umukoro (2013), the majority of child protection programmes in Nigeria have extremely little coverage. Not only is it low, but it also doesn't get to the intended audience due to the high level of corruption and favoritism in the execution process.

Particularly in the area of child protection, participative practice may appear like an impossibility for a lot of social workers (Wilkins & Whittaker, 2018). In developed countries, the obstacles faced by child protection social workers (CPSWs) in their pursuit of long-term solutions have significantly increased (Isangha, Akintunde, Choi, and Lin, 2023)

Study Methodology

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey to conduct the research from February 1st to 31st, 2024. This is based on the fact that the cross-sectional survey research design allows collection of relevant data at a given point in time (Kesmodel, 2018). And it allows researchers to observe and collect information from a cross-section of a population on a defined issue within a given period (Kabir, 2016).

The study area is Cross River State, Nigeria situated in the Niger Delta region South Eastern Nigeria with the State capital located in Calabar. The State has three senatorial districts namely: Southern, Central, and Northern Senatorial Districts, with eighteen (18) Local Government Areas and one hundred and ninety-three (193) political wards. According to the 2006 National Census in Nigeria, Cross River State population stands at 2,892,988 persons, comprising 1,471,967 males and 1,421,021 females.

The target population for this study are persons who are aged 18 years and above and a sample size of 150 adults determined statistically using the formula by Taro Yamane (1967). The study utilized multi-stage sampling technique involving stratification, simple random sampling, systematic, purposive and availability sampling techniques to select 50 respondents from each senatorial district. Data was gathered using self-administered questionnaires and was analyzed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 24.

Results

Socio-demographic characteristics

The study explored the public perceptions of child protection in Nigeria and the crucial role of child protection social workers. The Table 1 below reveals the age, sex, education and occupation. A close examination of Table 1 indicates that among the respondents, the majority (62.0%) were 36-45years old, and were predominantly females (65.3%). The respondents' educational profile as contained in the Table reveals that an appreciable number of the respondents (34.0%) had primary education; those in business were 44.7%.

Table 1. Percentage distribution of respondents by socio-demographic variables

Socio-demographic characteristics	Frequency	Percentages (%)
Age		
18-25 years	18	12.0
25-35 years	28	18.7
36-45 years	93	62.0
46 years and above	11	7.3
Sex		
Males	52	34.7
Females	98	65.3
Education		
No Formal Education	31	20.7
Primary	51	34.0
Secondary	33	22.0
Tertiary	35	23.3
Occupation status		
Student	35	23.3
Artisan	34	19.3
Business	67	44.7
Civil/Public servant	19	12.7

Source: Field survey, 2024

Knowledge level of child protection

Modern Nigerian child protection

Table 2 below contains the percentage distribution of respondents' responses to their knowledge of child protection in the modern Nigerian context. Among the respondents, the result revealed that

for the knowledge of Child's Right Act (2003) only 28.0% were aware of it, 11.3% were aware of National Human Rights Commission, 23.3% were aware of Human rights club' in schools, 24.7% were aware of Nigeria States adopt the CRA and 12.7% were aware of access to free CRA services. The analysis indicated that the general knowledge level of child protection in the modern Nigerian context is low.

Table 2: *Percentage distribution of child protection in the modern Nigerian context*

Knowledge level of child protection	FREQUENCY (%)	FREQUENCY (%)	TOTAL (%)
	YES	NO	
Child's Right Act (2003)	42 (28.0%)	108 (72.0%)	150 (100%)
National Human Rights Commission	17 (11.3%)	133 (88.7%)	150 (100%)
Human rights club' in schools	35 (23.3%)	115 (76.7%)	150 (100%)
Nigeria States adopt the CRA	37 (24.7%)	113 (75.3%)	150 (100%)
Access to free CRA services	19 (12.7%)	131 (87.3%)	150 (100%)

Source: *Field survey, 2024*

Traditional or cultural Nigerian child protection

Table 3 below contains the percentage distribution of respondents' responses to their knowledge of child protection in the traditional or cultural Nigerian method. Among the respondents, the result revealed that 89.3% were aware of parental provision of basic needs as method of child protection, 97.3% were aware of child fostering/rearing, 90.0% were aware of exploitative child labour, 79.3% were aware of corporal punishment and 87.3% were aware of stigmatisation of children as witches.

Table 3: *Percentage distribution of child protection in the modern Nigerian context*

Knowledge level of child protection	FREQUENCY (%)	FREQUENCY (%)	TOTAL (%)
	YES	NO	
Parental provision of basic needs	134 (89.3%)	16 (10.7%)	150 (100%)
Child fostering/rearing	146 (97.3%)	4 (2.7%)	150 (100%)
Exploitative child labour	135 (90.0%)	15 (10.0%)	150 (100%)
Corporal punishment	119 (79.3%)	31 (20.7%)	150 (100%)
Stigmatisation of children as witches	131 (87.3%)	19 (12.7%)	150 (100%)

Source: *Field survey, 2024.*

Knowledge of the role of child protection social work

The Table 4 below contains the percentage distribution of respondents' responses to their knowledge of knowledge of the role of child protection social work. Among the respondents, the result revealed that only 48.7% were aware of child protection social worker, 82.0% were aware of counselling/therapeutic services, 82.0% were aware of advocacy services, 79.3% were aware of assessment of cases and 87.3% were aware of community development.

Table 4: *Percentage distribution of respondents' responses on knowledge of child protection social work*

Knowledge of child protection social work	FREQUENCY (%)	FREQUENCY (%)	TOTAL (%)
	YES	NO	
Child protection social worker	73 (48.7%)	77 (51.3%)	150 (100%)
Counselling/therapeutic services	123 (82.0%)	27 (18.0%)	150 (100%)
Advocacy services	102 (68.0%)	48 (32.0%)	150 (100%)
Assessment of cases	119 (79.3%)	31 (20.7%)	150 (100%)
Community development	131 (87.3%)	19 (12.7%)	150 (100%)

Source: *Field survey, 2024.*

Discussion

Children are priceless resources and joys to the entire community, not just their parents and close relatives who need protection. Due to children's immaturity on all levels—physical, mental, and emotional—they require protection because they are unable to defend themselves. Thus, the present study investigated on public perceptions of child protection in Nigeria and the crucial role of child protection social workers.

The present study reveal that the general knowledge level of child protection in the modern Nigerian context is low (48.0%) compared to the traditional or cultural Nigerian method. The Nigerian society is made up of a variety of traditions, customs and practices which make them to have diverse view of child protection differently among the tribes of the North, east, west, or south. Foua, and Diriwari (2020) posit that the protection of the child in Nigeria requires that conflicting cultural and traditional considerations with modern views on the status of the child in Nigerian society should be adequately addressed.

Furthermore, this study finding revealed that the majority of the respondents (51.5%) were not familiar with the professional designation 'Child Protection Social Worker', but demonstrates substantial knowledge about social workers' areas of practice (82,5%) with low level of knowledge of social work roles (43.5%) on child protection. The field of child protection social work in the modern society like Nigeria has become an important area of practice (Lynch, Newlands, & Forrester, 2019). An accredited Child Protection Social Workers develop policy and design and deliver services to children involved in the child protection system (Parker, 2020). Social workers work with families when there is a concern about the welfare, protection or safety of a child.

Conclusion

Every government and society have an obligation to make sure that children have all the support, care, safety, education, and training they require to develop into contributing members of society. However, due to the large number of children working in various "hard jobs," child protection becomes a major concern in Nigeria today. The efforts of the community, government, organizations, and parents to safeguard children are intimately related to the field of child welfare (Ngwu, Ogbuke, & Ofoegbu, 2020). The field of child protection social work in the modern Nigeria should to be promoted and people made to know about them.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the recommendations made include the need to strengthen the awareness of and enforcement of protection-related legislative and policy frameworks in Nigeria. There is need to support effective inter-agency tailored to capacity-building initiatives for child protection. Also, the stakeholders should invest on awareness raising, preventative activities and response services to address child protection vulnerabilities.

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