

## **PREVENTING PAINFUL FUTURES: A POLICY-FOCUSED STUDY ON REDUCING CHILD ABUSE AND ITS LONG-TERM EFFECTS IN NIGERIA**

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### **Abstract**

Child abuse remains a pervasive social issue that profoundly impacts individuals and communities globally, leaving lasting scars that often extend into adulthood. The long-term effects of abuse are multifaceted, influencing survivors' psychological health, emotional well-being, and social relationships. This paper explores these enduring consequences by examining various forms of abuse: physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect and their detrimental outcomes, such as mental health disorders, and difficulties in forming healthy relationships. By highlighting the interconnectedness of these experiences, this paper aims to inform effective policy recommendations focused on comprehensive prevention strategies and timely interventions. The paper hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of this critical issue and advocate for a society that prioritizes child protection and well-being, fostering resilience and breaking the cycle of abuse for a healthier future for all.

**Keywords:** Child, abuse, Psychological, Social, Physical, interventions, Policy

### **Introduction**

Children represent the cornerstone of every society, serving as both its most valuable resource and its most vulnerable population. They embody the promise of continuity and the hope for a more prosperous and equitable future. Their well-being, development, and protection are therefore of paramount importance to the stability and advancement of communities and nations alike. Ensuring that children grow up in a safe, nurturing, and supportive environment is not merely a moral responsibility but a social and legal obligation shared by all sectors of society. When children are neglected, exploited, or abused, the consequences can reverberate for generations, undermining social cohesion, economic development, and public health.

In the Nigerian context, the issue of child abuse is both pressing and pervasive. It affects children across the country, regardless of ethnicity, religion, or socio-economic status. Cases of physical maltreatment, emotional neglect, sexual violence, child labor, trafficking, and abandonment are regularly reported in both rural and urban settings. Nigerian children, like their counterparts globally, have the inherent right to protection, dignity, and care. Yet, many are denied these rights due to systemic failures, harmful cultural norms, and economic hardship. While the Nigerian government has taken important steps toward addressing this issue including the enactment of the Child Rights Act and the establishment of child protection

units implementation remains inconsistent and enforcement often weak, particularly in remote areas.

Child abuse is a societal problem that transcends religious, ethnic, and cultural boundaries. It is not unique to any one community but is a challenge faced by humanity at large. Therefore, the responsibility for curbing child abuse and mitigating its long-term effects lies with everyone: governments, civil society, faith-based organizations, academic institutions, and individuals. There is a pressing need to foster a unified and inclusive approach to child protection, grounded in shared human values and supported by effective policies and practices.

This study seeks to explore the multifaceted nature of child abuse, focusing on its long-term psychological, emotional, and social consequences. It also aims to evaluate existing efforts to prevent and respond to child abuse, with a view to recommending strategies that are both comprehensive and sustainable. By promoting awareness and encouraging informed action, this research aspires to contribute to the broader goal of creating a society in which all children are safe, respected, and empowered to realize their full potential.

### **Objectives of the Study**

The main topic of the study is: *Curbing Child Abuse and Its Long-Term Effects: A Study of the Causes and Consequences of Child Abuse in Nigeria*. The specific objectives include the following.

1. To examine the root causes of child abuse in Nigeria, including socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that contribute to its persistence.
2. To analyze the long-term psychological, emotional, and social consequences of different forms of child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect) on survivors in Nigeria.
3. To propose evidence-based strategies for preventing child abuse and mitigating its long-term effects through improved policies, early intervention, and community-based support systems.

### **Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the causes, long-term consequences, and prevention strategies related to child abuse in Nigeria. Thematic analysis will be used to systematically identify and interpret patterns and themes within the data, enabling a deep understanding of the social, cultural, and psychological factors influencing child abuse from the perspectives of survivors, caregivers, and professionals involved in child protection.

This study utilized secondary qualitative data collected from various credible sources relevant to child abuse in Nigeria. These include published research articles, government and NGO reports, and policy documents. The selected sources provided rich, contextual information on the causes, long-term consequences, and prevention strategies related to child abuse. Only sources directly addressing the Nigerian context and meeting quality criteria for authenticity and relevance were included to ensure the validity of the findings.

## **Literature Review**

Child abuse refers to any form of maltreatment, whether physical, emotional, sexual, or through neglect, inflicted upon a child by a parent, caregiver, or other individuals. It involves actions or omissions that result in actual or potential harm to a child's health, development, dignity, or survival. In the context of Nigeria, child abuse is influenced by a variety of factors, including cultural practices, poverty, illiteracy, and weak law enforcement (UNICEF, 2021). Understanding the concept of child abuse is central to this study, as it forms the basis for examining its root causes and the devastating impact it can have on children and society at large.

### **Types of Child Abuse**

**Physical abuse:** physical abuse is a pervasive issue that encompasses the intentional infliction of harm or injury on a child. In Nigeria, this form of abuse manifests through various means, including hitting, beating, and burning, often framed as disciplinary actions. The normalization of corporal punishment in homes and schools has deep cultural roots, with many parents and educators believing that such methods are effective for instilling discipline.

Recent data from a 2020 study by the National Bureau of Statistics in Nigeria reported that about 54% of children aged 0-17 had experienced some form of physical punishment in the home. This statistic highlights the urgent need for intervention and raises concerns about the normalization of violence in child-rearing practices.

**Emotional Abuse:** emotional abuse refers to behaviors that harm a child's self-worth or emotional well-being. This can include verbal abuse, constant criticism, rejection, and other forms of psychological manipulation. In Nigeria, emotional abuse often overlaps with other forms of abuse, making it a complex issue that is frequently overlooked. For instance, verbal abuse is a common concern, where children are subjected to insults, derogatory language, and belittling remarks from parents and caregivers (UNICEF, 2021) report indicated that approximately 30% of children in Nigeria experience emotional abuse, primarily through verbal attacks and neglect.

**Sexual Abuse:** sexual abuse is a deeply troubling form of abuse in which an adult exploits a child for sexual stimulation, encompassing a range of inappropriate behaviours aimed at the physical gratification or financial gain of the abuser. A 2021 report by the National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) highlighted that a significant percentage of reported abuse cases involved sexual violence.

**Neglect:** neglect is often the most insidious form of child abuse, as it can be less visible than physical or sexual abuse, making it easier to overlook. Research indicates that neglected children may face significant delays in emotional and cognitive development. For instance, a study by Slack et al. (2020) found that children who experience neglect are at a higher risk for developmental delays, affecting their social skills and ability to form healthy relationships. This early deprivation can lead to lasting consequences that impede their potential for thriving in adulthood.

### **Causes of Child Abuse in Nigeria**

Key factors contributing to child abuse in Nigeria include unwanted pregnancies, poverty, broken homes, and the relentless pursuit of better opportunities by parents.

**Unwanted pregnancies:** which encompass both mistimed and unplanned pregnancies, have become a significant social problem in Nigeria. According to research, the prevalence of premarital pregnancies is alarming, leading to an increase in the adolescent population, which further strains societal resources (Okebukola, 2012). It has been reported that over 900,000 births occur annually among adolescents in Nigeria, with 150 out of every 1,000 births to women aged 19 or younger. Many of these young parents are ill-prepared for the responsibilities of parenthood, resulting in children who often lack access to quality education and essential social opportunities (Aigbe & Zannu, 2018).

**Poverty:** is another major factor contributing to child abuse in Nigeria, as it encompasses a range of issues including inadequate income, nutrition, and access to education. It is characterized by vulnerability and exposure to risks such as low life expectancy and limited purchasing power. Poverty has been identified as one of the most frequently cited factors associated with child abuse, with families living in poverty particularly susceptible to such crises (Lesa-Bethea, 2019).

**The breakdown of family:** structures, particularly through divorce or the death of a parent, significantly contributes to child abuse. When marriages falter, the focus often shifts to the couple's issues, neglecting the overall well-being of their children. Children are generally safer living with their biological married parents compared to those in other family configurations (Alokan, 2020). The disintegration of a family unit can diminish parental care and support, leaving children vulnerable to abuse.

### **Consequences of Child Abuse**

Childhood abuse has far-reaching effects that extend beyond immediate trauma, significantly impacting a survivor's mental and health wellbeing thereby exposing them to disorders such as depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders, difficulties in forming healthy relationships, impaired cognitive and emotional development.

**Depression:** is a common and significant outcome for many survivors of childhood abuse. Feelings of worthlessness, hopelessness, and persistent sadness can dominate their emotional landscape. Survivors may grapple with a profound sense of disconnection from themselves and others, which can exacerbate feelings of loneliness. They may struggle to find joy or pleasure in activities they once enjoyed, leading to a cycle of withdrawal and isolation. Research indicates that these depressive symptoms not only affect mental health but can also impair physical health and overall quality of life (Brown & D'Arcy, 2020).

**Anxiety:** is another common mental health issue among survivors of child abuse. The traumatic experiences often result in heightened states of arousal, fear, and hyper-vigilance, which are hallmark symptoms of anxiety disorders. Survivors may constantly feel threatened, even in safe environments, leading to a debilitating cycle of anxiety that can manifest as generalized anxiety disorder, panic disorder, or social anxiety. Studies by Harkness and Hayden (2020) indicate that

abused children exhibit increased levels of anxiety symptoms, which can affect their ability to concentrate and perform academically.

**Post-traumatic stress:** disorder (PTSD) is another serious consequence of childhood abuse, characterized by flashbacks, nightmares, and severe emotional distress. The connection between childhood trauma and PTSD is well-documented, with abused children being more likely to develop PTSD symptoms than their non-abused counterparts. A meta-analysis by Leen-Feldner, Feldner, and Vujanovic (2021) found that individuals with a history of childhood abuse exhibit significantly higher rates of PTSD, with many meeting diagnostic criteria for the disorder.

**The emotional repercussions:** of child abuse can be profound and enduring, significantly affecting an individual's ability to navigate life and relationships. Survivors often struggle with low self-esteem, feeling unworthy or damaged due to their past experiences. This diminished self-worth can lead to persistent negative self-talk, making it difficult to recognize personal strengths and capabilities. Consequently, many survivors avoid opportunities for personal growth out of fear of failure or rejection. Brown and D'Arcy (2020) link this low self-esteem strongly to feelings of hopelessness and depression, which exacerbate mental health issues and hinder overall life satisfaction.

**Trust issues:** also present a significant challenge for survivors of child abuse. Having experienced betrayal or harm from caregivers, many develop inherent skepticism toward others. This distrust can manifest as difficulty forming new relationships or maintaining existing ones, often resulting in isolation. Survivors may oscillate between pushing others away and becoming overly dependent on a few close relationships due to fears of abandonment or rejection. Bartholomew and Horowitz (2021) found that survivors frequently exhibit anxious or avoidant attachment styles.

**Cognitive effects:** child abuse has profound cognitive effects, significantly affecting learning and academic achievement. Abused children often face challenges with concentration, memory, and problem-solving skills, which impede educational progress. Traumatic experiences can disrupt brain development, particularly in areas related to learning and emotional regulation. Research by Evans and Kim (2019) shows that children exposed to abuse score lower on cognitive assessments compared to non-abused peers, highlighting the long-term impact on academic performance.

#### **Theoretical Framework:**

The Ecological Systems Theory, developed by Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979), provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the complex, multi-layered influences on child abuse. This theory conceptualizes human development within a set of nested environmental systems that interact with each other: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem.

The microsystem includes immediate settings such as the family, school, and peer groups. In the context of Nigeria, abuse often originates within dysfunctional family units where parents or guardians may use violence as a disciplinary tool.

The mesosystem involves the interconnections between microsystems—for example, how school, religious institutions, and social services either intervene or reinforce abusive behaviors.

The exosystem includes external environments that indirectly affect the child, such as parents' workplaces, media, and community-level services. Economic hardship, unemployment, and poor access to child protection services are significant factors in this layer.

The macrosystem represents broader cultural, legal, and socioeconomic structures. In Nigeria, cultural norms that tolerate physical punishment and gender-based discrimination, coupled with weak legal enforcement, contribute to the persistence of child abuse.

The chronosystem captures the dimension of time—how events such as conflict, displacement, or policy changes, and developmental transitions like adolescence, impact the child's experience over time.

This theory is particularly useful for this study because it emphasizes that child abuse is not caused by a single factor, but rather by a constellation of interacting influences across individual, relational, community, and societal levels. It also aligns well with a thematic analysis approach, helping to categorize qualitative findings into meaningful layers of influence.

### **Presentation of Findings**

The findings are presented in line with the study's three main objectives: to explore the underlying causes of child abuse in Nigeria; to examine the long-term psychological and social consequences of child abuse; and to identify effective prevention and intervention strategies within the Nigerian context.

The study identified multiple, interconnected causes of child abuse in Nigeria. At the family level, poverty, unemployment, and parental stress often lead to physical discipline, which is culturally accepted as moral correction. Harmful societal practices such as child marriage, witchcraft accusations, and domestic servitude also play significant roles, while weak legal enforcement and insufficient child protection services allow abuse to remain unreported or unresolved. Gender-based discrimination disproportionately affects girls, especially regarding sexual and domestic abuse.

Child abuse has profound long-term psychological and social impacts on survivors. Common mental health issues include depression, anxiety, PTSD, and low self-esteem. Social stigma, particularly related to sexual abuse, can lead to school dropout, early marriage, and social withdrawal.

The findings emphasize the need for multi-level prevention and intervention strategies. Community awareness programs are critical to changing attitudes about child discipline and encouraging abuse reporting. School-based education that informs children about their rights and trains teachers to detect abuse is also necessary.

### **Discussion**

The findings of this study confirm that child abuse in Nigeria is deeply rooted in cultural norms, socioeconomic hardship, and weak institutional frameworks. Physical abuse remains

widespread, often justified as discipline. Akinyemi and Adewale (2019) emphasize how corporal punishment is culturally normalized, especially in schools and homes, masking its abusive nature. Emotional abuse, though less visible, is also significant. UNICEF (2021) notes that nearly a third of Nigerian children experience emotional maltreatment, often through verbal abuse. This aligns with Brown and D'Arcy's (2020) view that emotional abuse undermines children's self-worth, contributing to long-term psychological issues.

Sexual abuse continues to rise, with NAP TIP (2021) reporting growing cases of coercion and exploitation. Cultural stigma and patriarchal attitudes, as highlighted by Okpani and Adamu (2018), often prevent survivors from seeking help. Neglect, though frequently overlooked, emerged as a critical issue in this study. Slack et al. (2020) report that neglect severely hampers emotional and cognitive development, and this research shows its strong links to poverty and family breakdown.

Key causes identified include unwanted pregnancies, poverty, and disrupted family structures. Aigbe and Zannu (2018) draw attention to the burden of adolescent pregnancies and the resulting parenting challenges. Poverty, confirmed by Lesa-Bethea (2019) as a key risk factor, creates conditions where abuse thrives. Alokun (2020) stresses that stable family environments protect children, and this study supports that view by showing how divorce and parental absence increase vulnerability.

The psychological effects such as depression, anxiety, and PTSD are consistent with findings by Harkness and Hayden (2020) and Leen-Feldner et al. (2021), while emotional damage, including low self-esteem and trust issues, mirrors Bartholomew and Horowitz's (2021) discussion on attachment styles. Socially, survivors often experience isolation and reduced functioning, as noted by Nurius et al. (2020), and cognitive setbacks identified by Evans and Kim (2019) highlight the urgent need for early support.

Overall, the study underscores the need for a comprehensive strategy to curb child abuse in Nigeria one that involves public education, stronger legal protections, and trauma-informed support for survivors.

### **Conclusion**

This study highlights that child abuse in Nigeria is a complex and widespread problem rooted in cultural norms, poverty, and family challenges. Physical, emotional, sexual abuse, and neglect are normalized through practices like corporal punishment and exacerbated by issues such as adolescent pregnancies and family breakdowns. The long-term impacts on survivors include serious mental health issues, cognitive difficulties, and social challenges, which not only affect individuals but also contribute to ongoing societal problems. Effective solutions must be comprehensive and culturally sensitive, combining community education, stronger legal protections, and accessible trauma-informed support to address both the causes and consequences of child abuse and promote healthier communities.

### **Recommendations**

The following recommendations outline key actions that can help prevent abuse, support survivors, and strengthen child protection systems across communities.

1. Launch local education programmes to raise awareness about the root causes of child abuse, promote child rights, and challenge harmful cultural practices through community engagement.
2. Provide accessible counselling services using proven therapies like CBT and EMDR, along with group support, to help survivors recover emotionally and psychologically.
3. Train key professionals to recognize and respond to child abuse through early detection, proper case handling, and coordinated referral systems.
4. Establish accessible mental health and counselling services. For instance, counsellors should provide essential therapeutic support using evidence-based approaches such as cognitive-behavioural therapy (CBT) and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR).

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