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Child Vulnerabilities in Nigeria: What is the Nature of Our Work as Child Protection Social Workers?

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Abstract

Terms like child abuse, child labour, street children, child trafficking, and child marriage underscore the vulnerability of children worldwide, and underpin the imperative of affording them holistic care. Such services must address the underlying factors that elevate their vulnerability as is consistent with the person-in-environment focus of social work. Given our historical commitments and top-notch values, the social work profession, more than any other, is most concerned with the well-being of children. Yet, not much is known of our professional action in Africa, a region near the pyramid's pinnacle in child rights violation. This article presents the findings of a qualitative study, involving five voluntary organizations, which explored the nature of social work services to vulnerable children. Drawing on a constructivist framework, semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data in Lagos and Abuja, Nigeria, and the results were then thematically analyzed. Findings indicate that social work services for vulnerable children require strengthening, since it does not address the root causes that exacerbate their vulnerability. Suggestions for navigating these challenges are explored.

Keywords: *Child protection, child vulnerability, person-in-environment, policy advocacy, social work*

1. Introduction

Terms like child exploitation, child labour, child neglect, child maltreatment, child trafficking, child marriage underscore the vulnerability of children worldwide, and underpin the imperative of affording them holistic care and services, in line with the social work profession's emphasis on the person-in-environment. More than any other field, the social work profession is most linked with child protection issues (Sossou & Yogtiba, 2009; Amadasun, 2020; Omorogiuwa, 2020a). In Africa, much like other parts of the world, the incidence of child vulnerability has increased to assume a frightening dimension. The concept of child vulnerability, as applied here, connotes the dearth of or inadequacy of parental care (i.e. from biological and foster parents, and guardians), including psychological and social protection resulting in elevated risks of abuse, neglect and maltreatment of children, including involvement of children in forced marriage, sex trafficking, and harmful labour (Akpan & Oluwabamide, 2010; Omorogiuwa, 2021a). As stated in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, UNCRC (1989) and other human rights or humanitarian treaties (African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1990) and national laws (Child's Right Act, 2003) as

well as programmes (Alemika et al., 2005; Omorogiuwa, 2021a), child protection refers to efforts to promote and protect children's rights from abuse, neglect, exploitation, and violence. Omorogiuwa (2020a) added that the goal of child protection work is to prevent, address, and end child exploitation and violence in all work environments.

The incidence of child rights violation is growing at an alarming rate. The International Labour Organization's report shows regional breakdown indicates that sub-Sahara Africa tops the chart with 59 million children aged 5 to 17 working as child labourers (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Other reports underscore children's vulnerability to forced marriage, pegged at 10 million, and trafficking, standing at 10 million. Although a conservative estimate given the clandestine nature of trafficking in persons (Amadasun, 2020), such secrecy largely accounts for the difficulty in child abuse and neglect allied figures.

Child vulnerability carries with it grievous consequences on the well-being of affected children. Literature has shown how such vulnerability results in depression, trauma, and mental disorder among many children occasioned by the mistreatment they have endured (Osiruemu, 2007; Amuda, 2010; Faloore & Asamu, 2010). Vulnerability also negatively impact children's education, triggering increases in dropout rates (Omorogiuwa, 2015; Amu et al., 2014) and resulting in social ills such as drug and substance abuse (Omorogiuwa & Omorogiuwa, 2017), delinquency and gang ties, including crime and terrorism. Taken together, these grim possibilities; poses legitimate concern to the social work profession. Dinbabo (2013) construes social work is an assemblage of value, sanction, purpose, knowledge, and method put into practice. Given the authoritative definition provided by the profession's global authority, social work is a practice-based profession and an academic field that supports social development and change, societal cohesiveness, as well as the empowerment and emancipation of individuals. It also states that social work is fundamentally based on the values of social justice, human rights, group responsibility, and respect for individual differences. It comes to the conclusion that social work engages individuals and systems to address life difficulties and improve wellbeing. This conclusion is supported by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities, and indigenous knowledge (International Federal of Social Workers IFSW, 2011). This position underscores the imperative of a comprehensive approach to social service delivery for vulnerable children in Nigeria.

1.1 Child Vulnerability in Nigeria: Prevalence and Predictors

Although statistics are slippery owing to the non-availability of a central database committed to child welfare issues in the country (this could be taken as a first pointer to the inadequate protection services for children), available evidence demonstrates that the incidence of child vulnerability is 'of astronomical proportions' (Amadasun, 2020, p. 187). ILO report corroborates this point, highlighting that millions of children are caught up in vulnerabilities, as one out of four children, are involved in different maltreatments, and a high rate in Sub-Saharan African with the prevalent proportion (26% of children) aged 5-17 years (United Nations Children's Fund UNICEF, 2022). This could also imply that the COVID-19 pandemic led to a considerable rise in child vulnerability. In the same vein, Owolabi's (2012) research in Nigeria, children have over the years been involved in a variety of job activities, including household, industrial, and street employment, with the resulting implications on their psychosocial well-being, education, and physical health. A number of children are repeatedly found occupied in work as vendors, selling their wares; as beggars, car washers and scavengers and iron workers.

Worldwide, dearth of resources and deteriorating economic circumstances has led to the increase street children. Some are children from the homeless or displaced families, while some spend some time with their families, but work mainly on the streets to support them, but live out there on the streets with their mates. Indeed, a number of street children are not strays, nor without parents, but still relates with their parents or families. The most deprived street children are those, who have no home other than the corners or sheds of streets and they have no link or interactions

with their parents. UNICEF (2005, p. 40-41) is concerned that even the "term 'street children' is problematic as it can be employed as a stigmatizing label....every city in the world has some street children, including the biggest and richest cities of the industrialized world. Majority of the children are boys, as girls seem to endure abusive or exploitive situations at home longer". Although, the issue of children living on the streets or street children sometimes are overtaken by some more pressing social issues, such as poverty or child labour/trafficking. The phenomenon of street children is often under the bigger issue of uneducated and jobless youth (Healy, 2008), as the issues of job loss and social marginalization are growing difficulties that are in advancing greater concerns within the global village.

Although child marriage is predominant in the northern part of Nigeria, its reach extends to remote locations across the country with the girls disproportionately represented as victims of the practice. A report by the United Nations Children Education Fund (UNICEF) indicates that of the total estimate of 90 million women in Nigeria, over half of the said figures (47.7 million) marry before the age of 18. It adds that 18.8 million do so before they clock 15 years of age, translating to about 60 percent of the total population of women in Nigeria (UNICEF, 2014). Child marriage plunges its victims into a life, characterized negatively on their physical, psychological, and social health being. Acute with unending domestic violence, unemployment, and low social status as it robs victims of educational opportunities and denies them of any prospects of acquiring life transforming skills while they stay forcibly married- against their will or by deceit (Adekola *et al.*, 2016). Poverty and lack of educational opportunities have been particularly emphasized as key determinants and consequences of child marriage.

Researches indicate that child abuse is the physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual mistreatment, neglect or negligent treatment or commercial or other form of exploitation, resulting in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship of responsibility, trust or power (UNICEF, 2005; Cicchetti & Carlson, 2010; Omorogiuwa, 2016). Family structures in terms of marital conflict, family size, single parenthood, lack of financial support and environmental influences have been attributed as contributing to most forms of abuses or maltreatment on children (Omorogiuwa & Omorogiuwa, 2009; American Psychological Association, 2016). Children of all ages, races, ethnicities, and socio-economic backgrounds are at risk for abuse. The most apparent consequences of child abuse are physical, educational, emotional, health and behavioural issues, which could be short-term or long-term (APA, 2016; Finkelhor, 2011). These abuses impair children's ability to learn and socialize and undermine their full development as functional adults and parents later in life; and in the most severe cases, leads to death.

Child trafficking is understood to include the practice in which children are placed in an exploitative situation for profitable advantage. A number of children have been trafficked from Nigerian rural communities to the cities and from country to country Eghafona, 2009; Omorogiuwa, 2018). Thus, some factors such as poverty, unemployment, poor educational opportunities, ignorance, lack of access to information and traditional/cultural attitudes have been attributed as the engine shaping trafficking in persons (United Nations Human Rights, 2014). Researches affirm that human trafficking is a key issue in West Africa, and Nigeria has huge proportions of the population entrenched in profound poverty and the prevalent desire of the poor people to move for improved prospects (Eghafona, 2009; Omorogiuwa, 2018). Trafficked children are exposed to different physical, sexual, mental, health and psychological perils; exploitations, debt bondage, deprivations, exposure to use of drugs and alcohol and they experience hostility locally and in foreign countries (International Organization for Migration IOM, 2008; Manbe, 2016). The consequences of human trafficking are grievous to the victims and to society at large, as individuals are deprived the opportunities of developing their potentials, which diminishes victims' social, mental and economic well-being.

Multiplicity of factors could account for the vulnerability of children. Rooted in dysfunctional structures and discriminatory values, coupled with ineffective legal framework, these factors as abovementioned range from oppression - which accords importance to the adults over children, to

inequality and inequity, and relentless poverty and slim economic opportunities (Omorogiuwa, 2017, 2020a). Specifically, Togunde and Carter (2006) acknowledge that factors like parental unemployment and low income provide favourable economic conditions for child vulnerability. As Omorogiuwa (2020a) argued, poverty and unemployment are a vicious cycle that creates an ideal environment for child abuses. Similar to this, research points that "Nigeria like all other countries is bedeviled by young and able bodied men living without jobs; 23,187,389 people are currently unemployed" (Abdulahi et al., 2022, p. 19). The ILO (2012) notes that massive unemployment in some countries account for low income of some households, which force children into vulnerability. With an unemployment rate of 37% (World Bank, 2014), it is not difficult to rationalize why many children in Nigeria are exploited and vulnerable, which subjected them to rights violations. As Amadasun (2020) poignantly argues; the issue of child vulnerability and blatant abuse in Nigeria 'rests squarely at the domain of structural negligence and crass irresponsibility on the part of the political leadership' (p. 179). Thus, children's vulnerability is well established as an important societal concern with significant ramifications for the affected children, their families and world at large.

1.2   Child Protection Organizations in Nigeria

Although the Federal and corresponding state's Ministries of Women Affairs and Social Development are charged with the mandate of ensuring the well-being of children in Nigeria (Federal Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development FMWASD, 2014), there is no statutory organization solely empowered by law to protect vulnerable children in Nigeria as is the case with trafficking in persons, for instance (Amadasun, 2020). This notwithstanding, the "Third Sector", that is, voluntary organizations are actively involved in child protection. These agencies largely comprise of civil society organizations (CSOs), nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and faith-based organizations (FBOs). More so, while many are not-for-profit, others are profit-driven. These child services agencies mostly rely on philanthropic gestures from citizens and noncitizens alike, government subventions in the form of tax exemptions (as is often the case), as well as donor funding in the form of grants largely from international donor foundations. Although the founders of these organizations may not be professionally trained social workers (in some cases, of course), they overly rely on the expertise of social work professionals. Consequently, social workers are often the principal officers in these agencies.

2.   Theoretical Framework

2.1   Social Constructivism

The discipline of social work has changed from one that depends on other professions to create social constructs and theories to one that is beginning to create its own distinctive constructs that only depend on a complex interaction and understanding between people and their social environment (Cooper, 2001). In line with the foregoing, social constructivist theory served as the theoretical framework for this investigation. The primary objective of employing constructivism in research, according to Cooper (2001), is to examine the social processes that people use to describe and comprehend their surroundings (p.721). As a result, constructivism was utilized to investigate how social workers perceive the nature of their services provided to people with disabilities, which is informed by their involvement in this. Song (2008) asserts that social workers' beliefs and perspectives on particular social phenomena have a significant impact on how they engage with their environment. When applying social constructivist theory to a social work inquiry, the researcher adopts a position of curiosity with the study participants and uses language to try to understand their reality while also acknowledging that no two study participants have the same perspective on a given phenomenon despite having shared experiences.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative assessment research design. Given that it is important to determine, for instance, whether the caliber of social work services provided to vulnerable children is in line with worldwide best practices and standards. The researcher was able to pinpoint the advantages and disadvantages of social work practice in Nigeria with particular reference to child safety by using this research design. In particular, a qualitative approach to data collection was used because the information needed was "descriptive and exploratory, and information was required directly from persons who were thought to have the required information" (Hofstee, 2009, p.132).

3.2 Recruitment and Retrieval

Data were purposively derived from 6 medium-scale organizations committed to child protection in Nigeria and lasted a 9-month period (7 months for data gathering and 2 months for triangulation). Four of these organizations were based in Lagos (the commercial hub of southern Nigeria) and two in Abuja (the capital city of Nigeria). These states were the focal point for two major reasons. First, is the availability of medium-scale agencies and their openness to participate in the study. Second, these cities have long been considered as the major bastion of child vulnerability. When the concept for this study first came to mind in 2019, an email was sent to the 6 organizations about the objective of the study and requesting for the participation of 5 social workers from each of the organization. Attached to the mail was a survey questionnaire that sought the demographic profile of the participants. Given that the researcher, who at the time worked with nongovernmental/international non-profit, securing their prompt response to the mail and consent to contribute in the study was not intimidating. Prior to the scheduled date for the interview in June, 3 social workers from 5 of the organizations (i.e., 15 practitioners) and 2 from the final organization had agreed to participate (thereby making a total of 17 participants). Although there were no academic qualification benchmark for inclusion in the study, all the social workers had a masters' degree in social work (MSW) and assumed administrative roles. The participants comprised 10 women and 7 men, and declared a minimum experience of 6 years. Semi-structured interviews (guided by an interview schedule, fig. 2) based on face-to-face interviews were utilized to gather data. Lasting duration of approximately 50 minutes each, the interviews were audio recorded following their approval and transcribed.

3.3 Analysis and Ethics

Subsequent to the interviews, the data were examined in accordance with the fundamental principles of interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). In order to produce a set of cross transcript ideas, the interview transcripts were typed up, examined, and themes were found and connected across transcripts (Houston & Mullen-Jensen, 2011). In qualitative research, trustworthiness and authenticity are crucial, and methods like documenting data completely and objectively, keeping track of occurrences, and using audio cassettes help to ensure rigor and strength. The interview transcripts were examined by the participants as an additional measure to ensure the authenticity of the qualitative data in order to confirm the veracity of the contents in terms of whether it accurately reflected their views and expressed their intentions. These stages were time-consuming, but they were important in guaranteeing rigor and dependability throughout the study process.

Aside securing clearance to undertake this study from the ethics and research committee of the author's institutions, this study also complied with the World Health Organization's WHO (2007) recommended ethical guidelines in dealing with scientific inquiry involving human participants. This study adhered firmly to ethical advice (Mugumbate et al., 2022) of voluntary participation and

consent (participants were assured they could terminate the discussion when they feel compelled). Added, is privacy and protection from harm (they were assured that the data gathering instruments-audio recorder and notes- would be concealed and subsequently destroyed). Furthermore, the names of the child protection agencies are anonymized. To further enhance their protection, their voices are largely offered as a group narrative to blur any individual recognition.

4. Interview Schedule

1. What exactly do you do as a practitioner in your organization?
a. Have you offered direct intervention to children?
2. What is/was the nature of your services to these vulnerable children?
b. What do you think would happen without your intervention?
3. What are the challenges you have encountered in the course of child protective work?
4. What are the impediments to child protection issues in Nigeria?

5. Findings

Their demographic characteristics (fig.4) of the participantsare highlighted followed by the presentation of their verbatim responses.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics

AGE N	GENDER N	Graduate Year N	Years-of Experience N	Academic Qualifications N
35-39 2	M 6	1995-2000 15	>6-10 8	MSW 17
40-44 12	F 11	2001-2005 2	>11-15 9	
45-49 3				

5.1 Curative

Curative action was described by participants as the 'cornerstone' of social work service delivery to vulnerable children. While noting its overly reparatory stance, they considered it helpful since 'half bread is better than none'. This implies the desirability of providing services regardless of the minute impact it may have made instead of no service delivery:

> *'Basically, what we do is to rehabilitate them [vulnerable children] before sending them back to their parents or guardians, if they have any. But if this is not the case, I'm afraid there is not much we can do since we do not have the capacity to nurture them for long'*

Similar sentiments were echoed by another social worker who decried their hopelessness amid the situation:

> *'It is disheartening sending these children away, which we fought hard to rescue, simply because of the insensitivity of our government… it is true that we do our bit, but to be sincere, it is most likely that these children will find their way back to the streets. Why won't they when nothing has changed in the society'*

Their intervention mechanism was described as psychosocial which they defined as the delivery of counselling and therapeutic services designed to restore the cognitive functioning of their clients. Although they noted that vulnerable children were victims of social dysfunction, their comments

suggest that the children were, in part, responsible for their condition:

'Generally speaking, we offer them therapy and counsel them. They do require this intervention because of the horrors they have been subjected to... these things can be very traumatic and injurious to their psychosocial functioning'

Another purports:

'...of course we offer them guidance and counselling, but to be fair, some of these children are rude and arrogant and so, in this case, you can't absolve them of blame for their predicament... yes, such behaviour may have caused their parents to abandoned them'

It is not unusual to expect vulnerable and highly traumatized children to display "outlandish" behavioural disposition. In fact, it may reflect normalcy to act in this regard given the horrendous experience they have endured.

5.2 Integral

The participants spoke of the importance of their service, describing it as paramount given the nonchalant attitude of the political authorities to the well-being of children. They imagined the deleterious impact that children's vulnerability would have on mainstream society without their intervention:

'One can only think of what would happen without our valuable and crucial services to these profoundly stigmatized children. Can you just pause for a minute to imagine the state that our country will be in without our efforts'?

By the same token, another posits:

'Right now, Nigeria is struggling with all manner of social vices including armed robbery and kidnapping, as well as insurgency and terrorism. All these are fertile grounds for the recruits of vulnerable children... so the very fact that we try our best to help our children explains the indispensability of our profession to national security'

Yet another adds:

'Think of how better our society will be if we receive adequate support from the government... it will be amazing the impact we can make for the betterment of the country and how much better our children can be as a result of our valuable services'

5.3 Disempowered

The social workers felt an immense sense of deprivation and incapacitation in the course of their service delivery to vulnerable children. They first highlighted the huge burn-out associated with their professional action which they linked to high caseloads. Such exhaustion was considered as impeding their work, in the sense that they sometimes vent their frustrations on children:

'You may not realize this but believe me, it is very difficult to keep your cool when you have multiple cases to respond to , reports to deliver, and existing children to serve. Sometimes, you may just explode and guess who would be at the receiving end of such outburst? The children most times'

Shortage of practitioners and ineffective laws also stood out in the comments of the participants. They decried the insufficient competently trained social workers in the country, revealing that many people who come for job interviews are not professionals. Pertaining to the laws,

they stated this has made them "handicap" as violators enjoy liberty due to poor implementation of laws:

'What we have here [in Nigeria] is a far-cry from an ideal situation. We have high shortage of social workers... in many of our advertorials, people who come for interviews are not trained social workers, so they do not understand our values and ethics'

With respect to the law, another remark:

'Our child rights law is a farce. It is worse enough to not have encompassing laws, but it is travesty of justice to walk scot free when people violates the rights of children...one can only imagine how disturbing it is when adults have sexual relations with girls of 11 years, it is very common here'

The non-legalization of social work in Nigeria as well as the lack of statutory "child protection" agency was described as a disempowering factor to the protection of children. They noted that, through legalization, they would be emboldened to collectively challenge cases of child rights violations across the country. It was reckoned that since they had the ability for grass roots mobilization, the authorities had deliberately refused to legalize the profession:

'Legalizing our profession is very crucial as it will not only enhance our public value, but it will also empower us to deal with child rights violators... with professionalization, we will be able to speak with one voice and call the authorities to order, so because of this, I think that is why they refuse to assent to our professional bill'

Pertaining to child protection agency, one participant utters:

'While we are in the not-for-profit sector, we still could have been able to make more impact if we had a central government child protection department or agency, in the sense that we could co-join efforts with them to tackle this problem. This could have made our job easier because as people are aware of the existence of government-run agency, they will tread with caution in subjecting children to maltreatment and all kinds of rights infringements'

6. Discussion

Although the contributory factors to children's vulnerability in Nigeria are structural, the results of this study demonstrate that social work interventions are overly remedial or curative. Such "mopping" strategy runs counter to the profession's person-in-environment perspective. Charged with the broad focus, 'practitioners are expected to respond to social developmental problems from a holistic perspectives' (Amadsun, 2020 p. 219). However, based on the time by which the participants completed their education, it may be likely that they are yet to undergo further training on or informed about the profession's person-in-environment focus.

The importance of social work services comes to light given the consequences of children's vulnerabilities. Studies have affirmed the impact of child rights violation to their overall well-being (Osiruemu, 2007; Togunde & Carter, 2008; Faloore & Asamu, 2010; Joseph-Obi, 2011; Owolabi, 2012; Jones et al., 2012; ILO, 2015), just as the public attest to the significance of social work services to child protection. Omorogiuwa (2015) for instance, found that the being vulnerable depresses children's school enrolments rates and encourages large percentage of school drop outs. In Nigeria, specifically, similar studies have shown that children who engage in time-consuming activities exhibit low attendance and punctuality at school and struggle to finish their schoolwork as compared to their non-vulnerable peers (Amu et al., 2014). Given that children's health is closely related to their well-being and chances for the future, it is also critical to understand the health risks associated with working children. The intrinsic effects of child labour have been discussed in literature, including the risks such employment activities pose to children's health and frequently have on their wellbeing

(Amuda, 2010; ILO, 2015; Omorogiuwa, 2020a & b). A number of children work in dangerous conditions with little to no nourishment, unprotected from dangers, and exposed to numerous chores at a young age (UNICEF, 2006). Studies have also identified the symptoms that are frequently linked to work-related income-generating activities in public places like marketplaces, workshops, and construction sites, including body aches, headaches, heat-related illnesses, dehydration, sensitivity to dangerous chemicals, and accidents (Togunde & Carter, 2008; Omorogiuwa, 2017; 2020b). The same goes for these children, who experience time constraints that prevent them from engaging in crucial play and leisure activities and emotional and social uncertainties like depression and hopelessness (Joseph-Obi, 2011).

Studies indicate that susceptible children experience low confidence, manifesting in be behaviours that include: anger, fighting, bullying other children, extreme shyness and strained self-confidence on their abilities (DiLauro, 2004; Omorogiuwa & Omorogiuwa, 2017). IPEC (2012) corroborated this assertion, signifying that the emotional bearing of being vulnerable include; diminished sense of self-worth, intimidation and depression. Violent and criminal tendencies; such as arson, pick pocketing, stealing, burglary, carjacking, possession of indecent weapons, cultism and insurgency (Osiruemu, 2007; Faloore & Asamu, 2010; Joseph-Obi, 2011; ILO, 2015). Pertaining to social work services, research have revealed that an important aspect in social work practice in which impact is most felt, based on public opinion is child protection (Song, 2008). Although focused in developed countries where there are effective child protection structures, the findings of these surveys affirm the trust the public accord to the social work profession in protecting vulnerable children. However, in this study, caution should be exercised as regards the claim of practitioners, describing their professional action as integral since this may be construed as admission to holistic service delivery to underserved children. Amadasun (2020) spoke of social work services in Nigeria 'as helpful to a certain extent but not overly wholesale or, if you will, comprehensive in scale as is consistent with the person-in-environment focus of social work' (p.277). The person-in-environment system's fundamental tenet is that interventions should attempt to enhance social conditions so that people can integrate into society at large while also restoring people's social functioning. Improving social conditions entails removing institutional or environmental barriers that led to the problem's emergence, made it worse, or threatened to impede people's ability to recover from it. According to Song (2008) what distinguishes social work from other helping professions and makes its intervention accessible is the dual focus on people in their social and environmental environments.

Vulnerability has been identified as a major source of stress in the child protection field (Ankut, 2008; Omorogiuwa, 2020b). Devising effective coping strategies with the demands of child protection work is intrinsic to effective service delivery. Omorogiuwa and Amadasun (2020) and Omorogiuwa (2021a) discovered that social workers used a variety of coping mechanisms to attain balance, job satisfaction, self-actualization, as well as meaning and purpose in the course of their work with children. These techniques include utilizing one's interpersonal and investigative skills, accepting risks and challenges, discovering meaning and purpose, preparing for the unexpected, maintaining realistic expectations, developing competence and confidence, receiving support from others and supervision, maintaining a significant life outside of work, processing trauma, and becoming more self-aware (Omorogiuwa, 2021a).

The points made about ineffective laws as hindrance to child protection have long been recognized (Kaime, 2009; Dinbabo, 2013). Although a signatory to laws and covenants protecting affirming the protection of children's rights, Nigeria has underperformed in terms of implementing the provisions of these laws. Nowhere is such suboptimal performance more evident than in the nation's Child Rights Act, signed into law since 2003. As has been noted, legal framework in the country is tied to complexities and characterized by inconsistencies First, giv.en that the country operates a federal system, laws made by the National Assembly can only be binding on states if it is adopted or domesticated. Second, the country's religious divide, many states have ignored or not yet consider the adoption of the Child Rights law into their respective domain. Today, one-third (n=14) of the 36 states of the federation have domesticated the Child Rights Act. Pertaining to the other

disempowering factors, scholars have equally echoed similar views. Idyorough (2003) observes that external factors, with particular emphasis on non-professionalization, are the reasons behind practitioners' ineffective services, rendering them largely incapacitated. Amadasun (2020) concurs, asserting that social workers deal with numerous challenges in the country. However, he contradicts Idyorough's (2003) views that practitioners have not made any impact, contending that meaningful contributions, typified by comprehensive services, could have been made if social workers had the much needed resources and support, 'inclusive of the legalization of the profession' (p. 259).

7. Limitation

This study has one major limitation; the non-inclusion of the voices of vulnerable children. Adding their views could have enriched the study by providing a balanced view. This notwithstanding, this study has provided a social work perspective (a scant viewpoints) to child protection issues in Nigeria. In being an exploratory study, it has deepened the discourse on child protection issues in Nigeria and by extension Africa, providing resource opportunity for professionals and policymakers.

8. Implications for Social Policy and Social Work

The outcomes of this study have significant implications for the Nigerian government, and for social work professionals (i.e. practitioner, educators, and researchers). Due to paucity of space, suggestions would be itemized for immediate policy response and professional action.

8.1 Suggestions to the Nigerian Political Leadership

Needless to say, the Nigerian political leadership has a crucial role to play in ensuring the protection of all children within the country. As a matter of accountability, morality, and national security, the Nigerian government should expedite action in ensuring the concretization of the following:

1. Liaise with nonconforming states of the federation to adopt and implement the provisions of the Child Rights Act. One strategy for achieving this goal is through lobbying and offering pledge of incentives to lawmakers and state governors. Although the "stick" approach (i.e. withholding states' funds) may seem optional, it should be taken off the table since it carries with it deleterious impacts on vulnerable groups.
2. Assent to the "Social Work Bill", which was currently passed by the Senate into law, as further delay would be construed not just as complacency, but as utter disregard for the well-being of children.
3. Grant subventions to front line organizations and encourage training and retraining of workers. One strategy for achieving the latter is through facilitating seminars and symposia where social work educators and practitioners could deliberate on new developments in the profession. Points of discussion could be how to navigate burnouts and effective and innovative case management technique.
4. Create enabling environment by investing in social infrastructures (including skills generating and capacity-building training for many indigent families who are semi- or unskilled) so that vulnerable groups can contribute to social development and in the process, reduce the vulnerability of their children. Authorities should also, in this line of action, encourage education especially of the girl-child through incentives (e.g. affording universal basic education for resourced deprived families).
5. Create a special child protection agency whose operations should be severed from the red tape associated with the current Ministerial steering. Such agency, empowered by law through an act of parliament, should be charged with the mandate of overseeing and evaluating the execution of child rights laws with a view to eliminating abuses and neglect. Manned with professionally trained social workers, such should also be engaged in the

administration of child protection services for all vulnerable children in Nigeria.

8.2 Suggestions to Social Work Practitioners

Although making efforts in child protective services, more concerted commitments are required to prevent further vulnerabilities of children. In this respect, social workers can make their effort pronounced if they become involved in policy practice and advocacy. The National Association of Social Workers has made clear the need for social workers to get involved in the political process…

In the context of policy practice, it is imperative to note that policy action could be ad-hoc and long-term depending on objectives. Hence, advocacy often comes to conclusion when stated objectives have been accomplished. Consequently, with respect to child protection issues, social workers should act expeditiously as follows:

1. Promote a "paradigm shift" regarding the widespread injurious and unjust cultural values that view the girl-child as chattels, denying them of schooling and exposure to undeserving vulnerabilities. Engaging community leaders, opinion leaders and traditional rulers is one strategy for building impact.

2. Encourage the establishment of federal and state child protection agencies as a means of providing child protection services. Social workers can influence legislators by writing letters to them, emphasizing the value of such an agency through the use of mass media, and lobbying via the voice of the children in danger. This could be a powerful tool in stoking action. Also, achieving in this respect will require forging alliance with key stakeholders such as nongovernment organizations and religious leadersand traditional rulers.

3. Canvass for the creation of enabling environment and investment in social infrastructure so that economically-deprived populace could earn dignifiable wage while also contributing to national development.

4. Use therapeutic intervention based on relationships and strengths with children who are at risk. Children should be given mental support in order to overcome the trauma and struggles of the challenges they have faced as well as to try despite all odds to become responsible citizens. To achieve this, it would be necessary to increase the motivation of children to finish school.

5. Advocate against disparity in school enrolment on the primordial basis of gender, at the same time soliciting for penalty against parents/guardians who deliberately act to sabotage the enrolment of their children. Parents/guardians who pondered taking such action may be discouraged if it is enforced.

6. Although Nigeria has adopted a universal basic education, there are demonstrable bottlenecks to enrolment, reflecting often in the form of concealed charges, developmental levies, and other miscellaneous costs. Again, drawing on our advocacy role, social workers can liaise with and solicit the support of the appropriate authorities to eliminate such blockade to vulnerable children's enrolment in schools.

8.3 Suggestions to Social Work Educators

As envoys of social work knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes, social work educators have a crucial role to play in building the capacity of practitioners in child protective services. Through conferences and workshops, educators can ensure the following:

1. Inform practitioners of innovative and improved ways of case management (e.g. through the use of technological and computer-powered software) in order to minimize burnouts.

2. Enlighten practitioners about alternative yet effective approach to reducing children's vulnerability. Utilizable models in this direction would be rights-based practice (which amplifies children's well-being as a right not privilege), anti-oppressive practice (which challenges harmful sociocultural values and socioeconomic policies), feminist practice

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(which frowns against the neglect of the girl-child in school enrolment), structural social work (which challenges structural injustice and social exclusion of children), and developmental social work (which encourages the empowerment of vulnerable households so they could adequately cater for their children and wards).

3. Educate practitioners about the profession's person-in-environment focus, from where they would be urged to provide comprehensive services to vulnerable children.

8.4 Suggestion for Further Research

Although studies about children's vulnerability abound in Nigeria, they are largely addressed from a non-professional perspective. Consequently, researches from a social work lens are urgently needed. Such research could be exploratory, evaluative, or descriptive. Specifically, to:

1. Explore social work intervention in any aspects of children's vulnerability (child marriage, trafficking, neglect, etc.), and such research design should strive to includethe voices of children to an alternative and/or balanced narrative.

2. Evaluate the impact or effectiveness of social work education in equipping students to adequately respond to the vulnerability of children. The aim could be, for instance, to determine whether students are well informed about children's vulnerabilities and what they perceive as the causes of such vulnerabilities, and whether or not they are ready to protect children upon graduation.

3. Describe the role the role of social workers in child protection, as well as ascertain their motivation for working with this population amid the enormity of challenges involved in child protection service.

9. Conclusion

This study has explored the nature of social work services for vulnerable children in Nigeria. Based on semi-structured interviews with practitioners in five (5) mid-sized organizations committed to the well-being of children, it finds commonalities in the nature of their services to vulnerable children. That is, overwhelming provisions of remedial interventions, which may result in the re-vulnerability of children as such measures, reflect a "cosmetic" approach to problem-solving, at variance with the profession's person-in-environment focus. It offers feasible suggestions to social work professionals and the Nigerian government in the hope that through assuming responsibility and providing accountable stewardship, forging partnerships and engaging in policy advocacy; the incidence of child vulnerability in the country would be drastically reduced.

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