

# Family Welfare: Implications for Child Development in Nigeria

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## Abstract

Most industrialized nations of the world have identified child abuse and neglect broadly as a social problem warranting state intervention. Although parents bear primary responsibility for raising children and ensuring that their needs are met, the state may intervene in family life when harm occurs or risks are present. Yet, despite the best efforts of all involved, service provision has been open to criticism for either failing to protect children adequately or, alternatively, intruding too much into the private realm of the family. Moreover, even though child abuse is a recognized social problem, the best efforts of child welfare systems have not stopped children from being abused (physically, sexually), neglected, or placed in vulnerable and risk-filled circumstances. The study examines the provision of Family Welfare Institutional services and its implications for child development in Nigeria. The provision of institutional childcare services as a component of child welfare services for children without parental or kinship care is fundamental for every community service and development. Child protection is one of the key elements of social work practice which covers both family-based and institutional care. The study reveals the many challenges that Family welfare institution face when handling child protection services. They include: poor staff capacity, inadequate professional social workers to promote counseling as an integral intervention measure to child abuse victims; and weak collaborative relationship with the Police and the court to process offenders, and matters of child right violations. The study recommends that manpower resources and capacity of family welfare institutions should be enhanced through regular recruitment of professional social workers to help the advocacy of protecting vulnerable children in Nigeria.

**Key words:** Family welfare institutions; child protection; child care.

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## **1. Introduction**

Globally, the family is customarily responsible as a crucial unit in addressing issues around normative care and provisions for child welfare and protection. The protection of children is a value shared by all cultures and communities around the globe. In almost all societies, responsibility for raising children well and preparing them for adulthood goes beyond the parents and is shared, to some degree, by the community at large [1]. The community investment in the wellbeing of its children is reflected in cultural mores and social norms in legal frameworks that permit interventions in individual families when children are abused or neglected. Historically, the British colonial government launched its first piece of social welfare legislation with the 1886 Guardianship of Infants Act in Nigeria [2]. This was followed by other acts and ordinances that sought to cater for the welfare of the people such as free services for the disabled, the establishment of Boys' Clubs to prevent delinquency among rural-urban migrants, as well as the establishment of remand homes [3]. Following the welfare footsteps of the colonial administrators, the post-colonial government in Nigeria, especially immediately after independence created specialist agencies to address welfare related issues. For instance, the Ministry of Social Welfare (traceable to Decree No. 12, also known as the Social Development Decree of 1974) was created with specialized sub-units such as the children's home, approved schools and children's remand homes to administer specific issues such as rehabilitation adoption and foster services. In this regard, the family welfare system became the umbrella institution that mediates between the family and the demands of other child correctional facilities. Similarly, the ratification of the Convention on the Rights of Children in 1991 by Nigeria and the road-map to the establishment of the Child Rights Act of 2003 clearly ushered in some level of hope for the welfare and protection of children in the country. The arrangement of institutional childcare benefits as a segment of child welfare services for children without parental or kinship care is fundamental for every community service and development [4]. Child protection is one of the key elements of social work practice which covers both family-based and institutional care. Family-based care entails social workers offering backing to networks and observing consideration gotten by children staying with their biological parents [5]. It also includes kinship care, that is, where children get similar support and monitoring services while staying with members of the extended family [6, 7, 8, 4]. Then again, institutional consideration includes caring for children who are set in extraordinary assigned homes in light of the fact that their families can't deal with them, or they have passed on. By and by, social workers are expert family based-care instead of institutional consideration, and in child and family care benefits, the accentuation is on family safeguarding procedures that guarantees children stay under the consideration of relatives. Institutional care is viewed as the last choice for insurance of children in spite of its apparent unfavorable consequences for them [4]. In any case, a cautious perception on the disintegrating family framework shows that as of now, children over the rural and urban families face unfriendly financial real factors that sabotage their essential human rights, along these lines expanding the quantity of helpless and amazingly poor children in the nation. This is additionally exacerbated by the extreme insufficiency of budgetary assets assigned to the child protection institutions, services and offices. The circumstance isn't diverse in States in Nigeria where far reaching frailty and vicious clashes emerging from the changing states of urbanization, and industrialization of the urban communities because of their immediate and backhanded relations with oil. To this end, this study investigates the family welfare institution and child protection in Nigeria.

## 2. Child rights violations and child protection

According to The United Nations Children's Fund [9] the term 'child protection' refers to any action that aims to prevent, protect and respond to violence, exploitation and abuse against children. A child protection framework may include legislation and policies that provide specific rights for children, services that support the protection of children within communities. Child protection work also responds to violence including giving medical treatment, and processes to ensure victims can access justice. Equally, the work of NGO's and CBO's may also be part of a child protection framework through the delivery of projects that aim to challenge cultural norms and practices that legitimize forms of violence against children. Furthermore, UNICEF (ibid)[9] states that building a safe environment for children includes the following core components: Strengthening *government commitment* and *capacity* to fulfill children's' rights to protection; Promoting the *establishment* and *enforcement* of adequate *legislation*; Addressing harmful *attitudes, customs, and practices*; Encouraging *open discussion* of child protection issues that includes media and civil society partners; Developing *children's life skills, knowledge, and participation*; Building the *capacity of families and communities*; Providing *essential services for prevention, recovery, and reintegration*, including basic; health, education and protection; establishing and implementing on-going and effective *monitoring, reporting, and oversight*. In 2007, an assessment conducted by the Federal Ministry of Education and UNICEF found that 85% of primary school respondents who participated in the survey reported experiencing at least one form of physical violence within the school context, while 50% reported experiencing some form of psychological violence, and 2% reported experiencing some form of sexual violence. Hence the family unit and schools have been identified clearly as places where children often encounter violence and abuse [9]. Findings from the recent research into Violence against Children, carried out in Nigeria (UNICEF and Centre of Disease Control, U.S.) as part of the global research on the violence experienced by children provides significant findings for Nigeria in relation to violence and abuse of children. A study by was conducted by UNICEF [9], with the Ministry of Education and the support of the Centre for Disease Control, in the U.S revealed that the Health and Life Experiences Survey of Young People in Nigeria is part of the global Violence against Children Surveys project. The Nigerian survey found the following; high prevalence and high acceptance of violence against children in the country; that perpetrators of the violence were generally those who lived with or lived near and were known to the child; they were not strangers; That 21% of 13-17 year old boys who experienced sexual violence in the last 12 months, experienced this violence in schools; among 18-24 years old, 58.4 % of females and 53.5% of males reported male teachers as the first perpetrator of physical violence; it proposed intervention strategies to include; encouraging children to speak out and increasing awareness of services/reporting; access to child friendly services and increasing effectiveness of services; holding perpetrators accountable; implementing laws and policies that ensure an effective response. With an increased focus on the child in the early 20th century, harmful home environments received increased attention. The establishment of public social care for children has been a collective responsibility between parents, individuals, and the state [10], where the state had the overall responsibility and right to intervene against the will of the parents and children. The number of children placed in state care has persistently increased at a rate higher than the rate of new and available foster homes or other institutional care. Moreover, this increasingly adds to the stressful nature of child welfare workers who experience numerous changes [11]. Most western industrialized countries have recognized child abuse and disregard comprehensively as a social

issue justifying state intercession. Despite the fact that guardians bear essential obligation regarding bringing up children and guaranteeing that their needs are met, the state may intercede in family life when damage happens or hazards are present. However, regardless of the best endeavors of all included, administration arrangement has been available to analysis for either neglecting to ensure youngsters sufficiently or, on the other hand, meddling a lot into the private domain of the family. Additionally, despite the fact that child abuse is a perceived social issue, the best endeavors of child welfare systems have not prevented children from being manhandled (genuinely, explicitly), ignored, or set in powerless and hazard filled conditions. Numerous reports in the media and in research propose that there are expanding number of children that are being abused. Certainly, a significant number of youth and adults report that they were abused children [12, 4]. Several studies have shown that in the last decades children are being cared for by the State, and more so than in recent decades, these children of the State exhibit the scars of deprivation, often indicative in problematic behaviors [13]. Reference [14] has rightly detected that most parents refuse are often in denial and fail to bring to the attention of the authorities such as the Department of Social Work (DSW) cases which involve the violations of involving child right violations due to the fact that the DSW has been unable to demonstrate over the years that it has what it takes to stand for the best interest of the child. People's perception of social workers at the DSW is that these workers generally lack the knowledge and skills to address issues pertaining to the children. Furthermore, due to cultural variations found in several parts of Nigeria, families in communities are compelled to settle issues pertaining to child rights according to the laws of their region, and such laws most times are not favorable to victims. This scenario is applicable to the majority of illiterate and semi-literate parents in most communities in Nigeria. Against the backdrops of these studies, one could surmise that the family welfare institutions (FWI) is still seen as a disputed and argumentative practice orientation in the family and social welfare care settings going by the prevailing social, cultural and economic occurrences affecting child welfare services and how these systems construct the needs of children and their family in the child welfare literature. Few studies have been done on the family institution and welfare of children in Nigeria [15, 16, 17]. For instance, Reference [15] examined the link between divorce and child protection in Lagos and came to the conclusion that divorce renders the family weak in terms of inability to protect children. Similarly, Reference [16] study of single parenting extends Mosley's worries on divorce by providing new insights into single parent families and their shortcomings in terms of child welfare. However, a more recent and slightly different study by [17] exposes how children from homes experiencing domestic violence are more often subjected to neglect and violations. As a result, he found that domestic violence in homes often led to hostile conditions that weakens a child's safety and welfare overall. Reference [4] explored and analyzed the views of management, childcare workers and children about psychosocial-centred childcare services in childcare institutions in Harare. However, one could surmise that the above scholars have made valuable contributions to the understanding of the family and child welfare protection but have failed to address the inadequacies of the family welfare institutions to protect children from parents perceived to be perpetrators of child abuse especially, as it concern the current conditions of parents who expose their children to vulnerable environmental harm whilst involved in street begging as either lunatics on the streets, alcoholics, drug addicts at homes thereby exacerbating the risks of child exposure to imminent dangers in Nigeria . The literature on family welfare especially in Africa tactically but not erroneously excludes the implications of family welfare units or institutions for children. This is simply because of the fact that, very slim empirical research works have been carried out in this regard. So, the focus here is

more on the literature that have examined the implications of some key family welfare indicators and how these indicators influence the welfare and or protection of children. A few of this literature have focused on the defective structure of the family and their adverse impact on children. As earlier mentioned above, most recent studies that have led the argument on dysfunctional family structure and adverse impacts on children are those by [15, 16,17]. However, in addition to these, the works of other scholars were reviewed as a way of contributing to the understanding of the subject matter. The understanding of the relationship between the family as an institution and the welfare of children is very central to researchers. Before the work of Mosley [15] on divorce and child welfare, other studies done outside Nigeria have suggested that divorce has the capacity to undermine the wellbeing of the family itself, especially with regard to child upbringing. For instance, [18] in a study on government and the measurement of wellbeing of the family, showed that, divorce across the world undermines even the most fundamental government attempt at ensuring the wellbeing of the family. In the study, Reference [18] drew a random sample of over 1200 families from ten (10) countries in Europe, America, Africa and Asia. The study made use of surveys and secondary data available from each of the countries in the sample. The study among other things found that a significant number of families are faced with divorce cases in court which goes a long way to threaten their wellbeing as well as their protective function when it comes to the welfare of children. However, the study also showed that Europe and America have the highest rates of divorce but this does not undermine child protection due to existence of government support systems for families. Also, the study found that child protection and welfare in Europe and America is further supported by high level viability and effectiveness of family welfare institutions in such areas. In contrast, the study showed that divorce rates are lower in Asia and Africa but child welfare in some Asian countries and in most African countries are very pathetic [9]. Hence, in a reverse order, the researchers established that government policies on family welfare and child protection are rather weak in these regions and to make matters worse, institutional capacity to manage the welfare of families such as social welfare Ministries is lacking. In more specific terms, family welfare institutions are either non-existent or where they exist, they are almost redundant in terms of meeting the requisite standard for addressing needs of family welfare and child protection. Mosley's work extends the understanding of the study discussed above. However, his research was done specifically in Lagos, Nigeria. In his study, Mosley surveyed a sample of 350 families drawn from over 2,422 families resident in Agege, Lagos State. His focus was to find out whether divorce is negatively related to child welfare and protection. In the course of the study, Mosley found that most of the children in the street of Lagos came from homes that have been rocked by divorce [15]. Furthermore, and corroborating the findings of [18], Mosley came to the sad conclusion that the social welfare system in Lagos State which includes family and child welfare is not sufficiently disposed to providing necessary help to families in need, let alone address the problems of children. Another recent study on family welfare and child protection in Nigeria is the one done by [16] which focused on single parent families and their adverse effects on children's welfare even though it narrowly contributes to the divorce literature. Just like Mosley's study, a few researches have been done on single parenthood and children in Nigeria but not really focusing on child welfare and protection in the social welfare system. The study that came close to Ayeni's work was done by [19]. The study measured the extent of inequality in Nigeria and found that low income and social support systems were major causal factors for poor child wellbeing. Omoruyi's study was done in Lagos metropolis using a survey of 200 households. The researcher came to the conclusion that households with low income and weak social support systems especially those run by single parents face

significant challenges with child upbringing.

### **3. Child Protection: The Family & Legal Aspects**

A careful examination of the literature on child protection shows that it can be categorized into two broad aspects. The first is the family welfare aspect and the next is the legal aspect. In the foreword to the Ghanaian Child and Family Welfare Policy, Reference [20] opines that children in Africa tend to be housed under closely-connected families where care is provided usually by an extended family structure. This ensures that they are kept away from all forms of harm that will endanger their normal growth and development in the society. Nevertheless, this has changed rapidly as the maltreatment of children has grown significantly across the continent. In Nigeria, for instance, a study conducted by [21] among households in selected states supports Luther's claims when it revealed that most children still experience high level corporal punishment, violence from parents, numerous forms of abuse, slavery as well as sexual harassment among others. Also, the study revealed that more children in Nigeria inhabit the streets of most of the city centres of the states included in the survey and they participate in all forms of commercial activities in the streets as well as in factories across the country. This is in addition to the problems of early marriage, female genital mutilation and so on. Studies of child protection in Nigeria such as those conducted by [16,22] on the relationship between family welfare systems and child welfare in Nigeria found that children and families tend to enter into government welfare systems through the activities of the police and social welfare ministries. This is in addition to numerous religious support systems that provide help to children and families in need. However, the researchers drawing from a survey of over twenty (20) Ministries of Social Welfare across the country revealed that public or government welfare systems are largely bedeviled by a general lack of financial and human resources to effectively deliver services. Reference [20] is of the view that widespread socio-economic challenges, rapid rural-urban migration and the breakdown of marriages as well as families are central to the weakening of family welfare which further generate conditions that undermine the commitment to care for and protect children. Hence, Reference [20] argues that, informal fostering takes on abusive dimensions when it means little more than food and shelter in exchange for labour, with no provision made for attending school even though it continues to stand out as the most basic strategy for managing children without their biological parents. Although family welfare units or institutions associated with the various Ministries providing social support for families and children tend to do their best to promote the welfare of children, few existing studies have shown that weak institutional support [23]; inadequate resources and information at their disposal [24] and insufficient follow-ups [17] all dovetail to weaken the efforts of family welfare institutions or units in their quest to adjudicate the process leading to the welfare and protection of children in the country. For instance, Reference [23] study on the link between social work practice by the state and family care in the Niger Delta region of Nigeria is very revealing. Using a sample of 710 children in a retrospective study of family case files across four ministries saddled with social work responsibilities in the region, John discovers that the units responsible for family and child welfare administration are weak in terms of the ability for quick decisions on several child protection issues they have addressed within a period of ten (10) years (2000-2010). Reference [23] concluded that the institutions are weak and therefore require significant overhauling. However, Reference [24] while acknowledging the fact that most ministries in charge of social welfare administration in Nigeria are weak, the reasons for this according to him, is due to insufficient resources and information at their disposal. In Ahmed's

study of seven (7) social welfare ministries in the northern part of Nigeria, Ahmed established that all of them are grossly underfunded and this further reduces their potential and their ability to gather enough information required to address key issues in their administrative works. The study for instance, shows that the Ministries of Social Welfare in the North are the least funded when compared to others and as such, they are compelled to work with what they have and deliver what they can. On the other hand, and in support of Ahmed's findings, [17] also proves that insufficient funds and resources create adverse conditions where family welfare units find it difficult to carry out follow-ups on some of their cases to determine whether children are being treated well or not. The next strand of literature focused on the legal aspect of child welfare and protection in Nigeria. In this regard, a significant number of them concentrated more on providing empirical understanding of the Child Rights Act of 2003. According to [25] Article 4 (1) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of a Child provides that "in all actions concerning the child undertaken by any person or authority, the best interests of the child shall be the primary consideration". This clearly provides a stepping stone towards ensuring the protection of children across Africa. Findings suggest that this provision was integrated into the Child Rights Act of 2003 particularly in Section 1 therefore stating, without mincing words, 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" (The Child Rights Act, Cap 2003). As [16] observes, the Child Rights Act was informed by the mandate to provide a legislation, which incorporates all the rights and responsibilities of children especially in its attempt to unite in a single legislation all laws concerning children. Section 264 (1) of the Act, provides for the establishment of a committee to be known as the State Child Right Implementation Committee (referred to as "State Committee" in the Act). The State Committee has the function of initiating actions that will ensure the observance and popularization of the rights and welfare of the child [25]. However, a more empirical look at the enforcement of the provisions of the Child Rights Act of 2003 especially with regard to the State Committee highlighted above, shows the gross inability of the state committees in ensuring the protection of the child's right [26], examined the functions and powers of the various State committees as a way of understanding their relevance in ensuring the protection of children. The study made use of ten (10) States in the North West and North Central geopolitical zones of Nigeria. In his study, it is found that over 90 per cent of the State Implementation Committees of the Child Rights Act have achieved very little in popularizing the provisions of the Act thereby doing little in terms of ensuring that children are protected. Reference [26] observed that the committees failed to create the necessary awareness required to raise the consciousness of the public concerning children's welfare and their protection. This according to [26] undermines any effort at the enforcement of the provisions of the Act since in most cases, people are not even aware of the Act itself. Other studies [26, 25] on the issue of the Child Rights Act in Nigeria have focused on the role of law enforcement agents in achieving its provisions. For instance, findings from [26] showed that the Juvenile Justice System in Nigeria does not sufficiently promote the actualization of the Child Rights Act of 2003. In a study of juvenile detention in several prisons across the country, Reference [27] found that children below the age of 18 years were remanded in prison custody across the country for seemingly minor offences. This according to [26] completely negates the Child Rights Act's provision on child justice administration in Nigeria. Similarly, Reference [25] adduced that despite the Child Rights Act, cases of children being detained in the police stations across the country without any fair hearing continues to undermine the rights of children.

#### **4. Situational Management Theory**

Despite the fact that the situational management perspective has been generally applied to the investigation of wrongdoing and abnormality organization, it is deserving of audit here given that the greater part of the issues or cases that precede the family welfare unit can be categorized under the latter. Given its emphasis on flexibility based on situations, the perspective known as situational management theory provides fundamental assumptions that suggest dynamism in terms of managing deviant behaviours in society. Within the context of child welfare management, the theory was popularized by [28] even though it has a long history that predates their work in mainstream criminological studies. The fundamental premise of situational management in child welfare administration as espoused by Clarke and Eck, is that distinctive welfare issues develop because of similarly various circumstances. In the light of the circumstances encompassing child welfare, the theorists propose that child welfare administration should be situational. In other words, in the course of dealing with child welfare problems, administrators in this area should take discernment of the specific conditions that created the issues that they are managing.

The core assumptions of the situational management theory are as follows:

- Different offences are as a result of different opportunity constellations and as such each may require specific interventions.
- Deviant behaviours related to child welfare is correspondingly based on the belief that such behaviours can be reduced effectively by altering situations rather than an offender's personal dispositions.
- Specific forms of child welfare problems should be tackled within the specific situation that warranted them and by specific intervention or measure.
- All administrative decisions aimed at child welfare problem management should be based on the specific features of the situation and imply some rationality and degree of adaptability.

It can be argued that the theory is applicable to every kind of offense in society. Thus, Clarke and Eck submit that: The lesson is that the limits of situational management should be established by closely analyzing the circumstances of highly specific kinds of offences, rather than by theoretical arguments about presumed nature of motions for broad categories [28]. In summary, the situational child welfare management theory is an integrated approach whose assumptions are known from the situation, rational choice and goal. It appreciates a standard methodology based on the action paradigm (research to change practice), a set of opportunities-reducing techniques, the goal to succeed and a body of evaluated practice including studies of social circumstances surrounding offenses.

#### **5. Discussion**

The study found that one of the major challenges associated with the implementation of administrative decisions on child welfare policies is the issue of outright violation of such decisions by erring parties. There is poor manpower resources and capacity for the family welfare institutions (FWI) in Nigeria to effectively arrest sustain professional social work advocacy relevant in protecting vulnerable children. Due to the absence of



routine training or inadequacy of the government to fund and improve the staff capacity of the FWI to meet up with the global demands for child protection the task of professional guidance and counseling service becomes elusive to help victims and offenders of emotional/psychological abuse of children in Nigeria. The police through the Juvenile Welfare Center are yet to align their relevance in child protection within the ambit of community relation that extends to the rural communities for an integrated child protection network and report system through a framework of the local intelligence gathering on child abuse/neglect and or offenses that involves children for adequate intervention against physical abuse of children in Nigeria. Furthermore, the family welfare institution in its collaboration with the courts have not be consistent and or functional in providing, processing and prosecuting cases involving child protection and maintenance of children with the needed urgency and a yet to establish the family court to see to the delivery of timely justice on child protection abuse since a prolong litigation would add to the psychological disorder of victims in Nigeria. There is absence of a comprehensive health insurance scheme channeled specifically towards the medicare needs of child protection victims established in or between localities for access and intervention into cases that affects the health status of abused children in Nigeria.

## **6. Conclusion and Recommendations**

Based on the findings reached in this study, the following recommendations have been made to improve on the implementation of administrative decisions on child welfare in Nigeria.

- i. The study recommends that manpower resources and capacity of family welfare institutions should be enhanced through regular recruitment of professional social workers to help the advocacy of protecting vulnerable children in Nigeria.
- ii. That effort should be made to revitalize routine training of guidance and counselors to champion the process of counseling parents, victims and offenders of emotional/psychological abuse of children in Nigeria.
- iii. That the police should extend the frontiers child protection to include a responsive child protection report system through a framework of the local intelligence gathering on child abuse/neglect and or offenses that involves children for adequate intervention against physical abuse of children in Nigeria.
- iv. That the family welfare institution in its collaboration with court should provide, process and prosecute cases involving child protection and maintenance of children especially through an establishment of family court to see to the delivery of timely justice on child protection abuse since a prolong litigation would add to the psychological disorder and challenges of the victims in Nigeria.
- v. That there should be a health insurance scheme that should carter for the medi-care needs of child protection victims established in or between localities for access and intermediation into cases that affects the health status of abused children in Nigeria.

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