

Original Research Article

Child Protection and Welfare Systems in Nigeria Examining Social Work Interventions through Document Analysis

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Abstract: Child protection is a sensitive aspect of the social welfare systems across the globe as more children get exposed to abuse, neglect, trafficking, exploitation and other vulnerable factors that threaten their growth and well-being. This paper analyzes child protection and welfare systems in Nigeria with special reference to the application of social-work intervention. Using policy reports, legislative frameworks, government reports and academic literature, the paper discusses the institutional frameworks, legal provisions that influences child-protection mechanisms in Nigeria. The analysis is based on three issues: child-protection policies and law that govern child-welfare in Nigeria; the functions and roles of social workers in the systems; gaps and challenges that impact the effectiveness of child-protection interventions. The study, which is based on the Systems Theory, conceptualizes child protection as a network of interrelating institutions, such as welfare agencies, legal systems, health care services, schools, and community systems, which act in unison to protect children against harm. The evidence shows that Nigeria has come up with a number of legislative and policy frameworks, such as the Child Rights Act that have been established to help prevent abuse, exploitation and neglect of children. The adoption of these frameworks, however, is inconsistent because of the poor institutional capacity, lack of sufficient funding and inter-agency co-ordination, as well as lack of professionalization of social-work practice. The discussion also establishes that social workers are very significant as direct service providers, advocates of protective services, and coordinators of these services by performing various functions like case management, family support, counselling, rehabilitation, and community-based interventions. This research recommends that Nigeria needs to enhance its child-protection system by strengthening legal enforcement, better professional capability of its social workers, better institutional coordination and community based support system to protect and provide comprehensive welfare to vulnerable children.

Keywords: Child Protection, Welfare Systems, Social Work, Interventions, Document Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Child protection is now a significant part of welfare systems across the world because the number of children who are exposed to abuse, neglect, exploitation, and trafficking continues to be high. The world has about 160 million children who are involved in child labour where most of them are subjected to hazardous working conditions that endanger their health, safety and growth (World Health Organization, 2020). It is also estimated that more than 50 million children are displaced, trafficked, or exploited in other countries, and the demand to develop efficient child-protection mechanisms in the welfare systems continues to build up (UNICEF, 2022). The international child welfare literature supports that effective protection systems must include coherent legal frameworks, welfare institutions, and professional social work interventions capable of ensuring children's safety (Healy, 2014; Dominelli, 2018). Globally, there are laws, policies, and institutional structures designed to help children grow up in secure settings and receive education, health care, and social services (Parton, 2019; Gilbert, Parton, & Skivene, 2011). The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has also been

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used to reinforce universal obligations, as governments are obligated to put protective measures to deal with child abuse, neglect, and exploitation through both social welfare and legal mechanisms (UNICEF, 2021).

Within this framework, social workers are considered key players, since they directly interact with vulnerable children and families, offer counselling and rehabilitation, organize community protection processes, and promote child rights (Payne, 2021; Ife, 2016). In this regard, child protection is a complex system of legal protections, welfare organisations, and social practice that can help children avoid harm and enhance their well-being (Munro, 2019; Ferguson, 2020). Nevertheless, even where child protection is a universal concern, most developing nations still face the problem of ineffective institutional structures, resource insufficiency, and professional incompetence, which tend to ruin the efficiency of the welfare-based system aimed at child protection (Gray, Coates & Yellow Bird, 2016; Midgley & Conley, 2010). Child protection and welfare issues in Nigeria have continued to attract increasing concerns because of the rising levels of child abuse, child labour, human trafficking, early marriage, street children, and other forms of human exploitation that continue to plague millions of children in the country. According to studies in the Nigerian social work and social policy literature, structural poverty, family instability, armed conflicts, displacement, and poor social welfare systems are all critical drivers of children being vulnerable (Okoye, 2013; Aluede, 2017; Chitereka, 2019). The Nigerian government has undertaken several initiatives through legislation and policy to address these issues, including the Child Rights Act and other national provisions to enhance children's security and well-being. These frameworks provide legal provisions to protect children's rights, institutional duties, and welfare services responsive to child abuse and neglect (Nwanna, 2018; Akwara, Soyibo & Agba, 2019). However, researchers in social work have noted that the implementation of these models is not always consistent due to institutional vulnerabilities, insufficient funding for welfare programs, poor coordination between agencies, and insufficient professional social work capacity (Okafor, 2016; Nwanna, 2018). Child protection systems in most communities are poorly addressed, thus forcing families and community-based networks to handle them with minimal assistance from professional services (Odeyemi, 2014; Chitereka & Nkomo, 2018). These circumstances have raised critical questions as to whether the existing child protection mechanisms are effective enough and whether the social work intervention processes are well-woven into the national welfare frameworks.

Within the larger child protection system, social workers are expected to play key roles in identifying vulnerable children, facilitating protective services, assisting families, and advocating for policies that advance the rights and well-being of children. Therefore, social work practice focuses on prevention, early intervention, rehabilitation and community-based support systems to ensure that the children are not exposed to social conditions that lead to abuse and neglect (Payne, 2021; Dominelli, 2018). In Nigeria, researchers have claimed that professionalisation of social work and its incorporation into welfare institutions is still inferior, which in most cases influences the efficiency of interventions designed to secure the safety of children (Okoye, 2013; Nwanna, 2018). Although many policy documents, government reports, and institutional guidelines define the roles of social workers in child welfare programmes, there is a paucity of systematic studies on how these roles are defined and applied to existing child protection models. This study offers a valuable methodological insight into studying policy frameworks, institutional guidelines, and programme reports. It aims to investigate the policy and institutional frameworks that govern child protection issues, and the intervention strategies adopted in dealing with child abuse and neglect.

Objectives of the Study

- i. To identify the major child protection policies, legal frameworks, and programmes guiding child welfare in Nigeria.
- ii. To identify gaps and challenges in existing child protection policies and social work interventions in Nigeria
- iii. To analyse the roles and responsibilities of social workers in child protection as documented in national policies and institutional reports.

Conceptual Review

Child Protection

The Child Rights Act 2003, Section 277, defines a child as anyone who has not yet reached their 18th birthday. The Act establishes two main requirements, which state that all actions must prioritize the best interests of children and that children must receive protection and care which supports their full development. Child protection exists to protect children from experiencing any form of violence, exploitation, sexual abuse or neglect of their rights. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) states in Article 19 Section 1 that all parties must establish legislative and administrative and social and educational frameworks which will ensure that children receive protection from all types of physical and mental violence and any form of maltreatment or exploitation which occurs during their time with their parents or legal guardians or other caregivers.

The term child protection describes the complete system that safeguards children from all types of intentional and unintentional harm; it includes established policies, operational standards, implementation guidelines and protective measures. The system of child protection establishes legal standards which enable authorities to identify potential child

endangerment situations. Child protection functions as the system which determines which services will be provided to children who require protection from abusive treatment and negligent behaviour of their caregivers (Okoye, 2022).

Child Welfare Systems

The child welfare system refers to programs, social assistance, welfare benefits and government intervention methods that operate according to the legal and social policy frameworks established by a particular nation. Advanced countries operate child welfare systems through functional models and practices, which include child development, child protection and family service delivery systems, which receive backing from Acts of Parliament and professional social work functions (Nwanna 2018). Child welfare describes how state agencies and their professional staff members provide help to families who experience child abuse and neglect and to families who need support with their children. Child welfare establishes its protective framework by using preventive services, which provide health, education, recreation, family support and treatment services to protect children.

Theoretical Framework

Systems Theory

This paper adopted the Systems theory. The theory explains how the parts of a structure interact and depend on one another to make the system work as a whole. The concept was first introduced in the biological sciences by Ludwig von Bertalanffy, who developed General Systems Theory in the middle of the twentieth century. Bertalanffy argued that complex phenomena could not be understood by considering the individual components separately, but rather as interacting systems in which all components interact with one another (Bertalanffy, 1968). In this context, systems entail elements that interact by way of processes of input, output, feedback, and adaptation to the environment. The theory was later applied to the social sciences by Kenneth Boulding and Talcott Parsons, who maintained that social institutions and organizations should be viewed as organized systems in which parts of the system ought to work in harmony to achieve stability and effectiveness (Boulding, 1956; Parsons, 1951).

Within the framework of child protection in Nigeria, the welfare system is viewed as a web of interconnected systems that include legal systems, social welfare organizations, law-enforcement agencies, courts, educational institutions, healthcare institutions and community organisations. All these organizations work towards the protection of children against abuse, neglect and exploitation. The systems theory explains that the protection of children does not depend solely on the work of one institution or the other, but on the successful operation and cooperative efforts of the whole protection system. For instance, the enforcement of the Child Rights Act presupposes the cooperation between ministries in charge of social welfare, family courts, law-enforcement agencies, and professional social workers who find vulnerable children, investigate the cases of abuse, and offer them rehabilitation and family support services (Okoye, 2022; Nwanna, 2018). Social workers can be considered as key connecting agents that bridge children and families with welfare services, legal protection systems and community-based support systems, making the child protection system efficacious (Ife, 2016; Payne, 2021).

Nevertheless, the systems theory also specifies that the performance of the entire child protection framework could be undermined once the constituent parts of the system become weaker, e.g. due to a lack of funding to welfare institutions or agencies functioning inadequately or a lack of professional social workers (Dominelli, 2018; Grey, Coates, & Yellow Bird, 2016). This can be demonstrated by the fact that in many Nigerian states in which the Child Rights Act has not been adopted or in which welfare agencies do not train their staff, children are at risk of abuse, trafficking, or neglect. This implies that the lack of protection of one part of the institutional framework can reduce the overall effectiveness of the system.

The systems theory, thus, provides a useful framework for child protection policy structure, defining the institutional roles of social workers, and finding operational gaps in the child welfare system of Nigeria. It highlights the need towards greater agency coordination and strengthening institutional capacity to achieve effective protection of vulnerable children.

METHODOLOGY

This research paper adopted a qualitative research design based on secondary data to explore the protection and welfare systems of children in Nigeria and assess the role of social workers in the system. The research covers documentary materials, such as policy documents, legislative frameworks (particularly, the Child Rights Act), government reports, and academic literature on child protection and social work practice. The main method of analysis is document analysis, which involves a methodical examination and analysis of written work to draw relevant information and also derive relevant themes. In this process, the relevant documents undergo scrutiny to outline child protection policies, the role of social workers, and gaps in protection mechanisms in Nigeria.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

The Major Child Protection Policies, Legal Frameworks, and Programmes Guiding Child Welfare in Nigeria

Theme 1: National Legal Frameworks for Child Protection in Nigeria

National legislation offers the legal background by establishing the rights of children and specifying the duties of the institutions that are to protect them. The best law is the Child Rights Act that encompasses international principles of child-rights in the Nigerian law framework and moves best interests of the child as the fundamental factor when dealing with children. The Act ensures that children have the right to survive, develop, acquire education, dignity and protection against abuse, neglect, exploitation and the harmful cultural practices (Ife, 2016; Nwanna, 2018). It also introduced institutions like family courts and child welfare services that address cases in children and make sure that protective interventions effectively are put in place (Akwaru, Soyibo, & Agba, 2019; Okoye, 2022).

Complimentary laws also enhance protection of children in the law. As an example, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act outlaws multiple types of violence, such as sexual abuse and practices that harm the traditional community, and the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act defines the means to prevent human trafficking and offers institutional assistance to the victims (UNICEF, 2022; Dominelli, 2018). All these legal frameworks give the welfare institutions, law-enforcement agencies and social workers the ability to step in cases involving the abuse and neglect of children. In line with this argument, a report mentioned by UNICEF has indicated that The Child Rights Act is the most detailed legal commitment to the protection of children in Nigeria as it offers a legal framework through which the government and the social welfare agencies can respond to abuse and exploitation (UNICEF, 2022).

Despite the presence of legal systems, institutional and structural issues remain the factors limiting the application and effectiveness of child-protection laws in Nigeria. Researchers have noted that, even though the Child Rights Act has created a national benchmark concerning the protection of children, its application diverges depending on states since Nigeria is a federal state, which mandates an individual state to domesticate and enforce the law (Ife, 2016; Nwanna, 2018). As a result, policy gaps often expose a large number of children to abuse, trafficking, child labour and early marriage even though the laws are in place (Akwaru, Soyibo & Agba, 2019; UNICEF, 2022). The lack of institutional capacity, insufficient financing of social-welfare services, and lack of proper coordination between the involved agencies also contribute to the failure of these laws to be effectively enforced (Healy, 2014; Payne, 2021).

UNICEF (2022) emphasized that although Nigeria has created effective legal tools to address child protection, their implementation is not uniform because of the lack of welfare staff, resources, and institutional cooperation. This implies that the legal frameworks in Nigeria offer significant statutory safeguards against children.

Theme 2: International Child Protection Frameworks Influencing Nigeria

The international child-protection systems have a central role in determining the child welfare and protection systems in Nigeria by assisting in establishing standards, principles, and obligations that direct national policies and legal changes. One of the most influential is the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, according to which the signatory states are obliged to take all the necessary legislative, administrative, social, and educational steps to protect children against any forms of abuse, neglect, and exploitation (United Nations, 1989; Okoye, 2022). Similarly, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child focuses on the rights of children in the African states, which highlights the necessity to protect children against harmful practices as well as to promote their well-being, education, and development (Ife, 2016; Nwanna, 2018). It is these international frameworks that provide the foundation for the legal and policy environment in Nigeria, like the Child Rights Act, the Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act and the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act (Okoye, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). According to the International Labour Organization, the adoption of the Child Rights Act reflects the willingness of Nigeria to adopt the international standards, which shows that national laws are consistent with international standards on child protection (ILO, 2021). These tools not only offer legal points of reference but are also used to give directions on best practices, institutional roles and programmatic interventions to safeguard children in Nigeria and wider Africa.

In spite of these positive factors, there still remain challenges of implementing international frameworks into local practice. Although Nigeria has ratified some major international treaties, its implementation has not been uniform, as domestication varies across states, there is a lack of institutional capacity, and socio-cultural barriers that hinder implementation (Ife, 2016; Healy, 2014). According to field reports from organizations like Save the Children and Plan International, respondents identified some gaps:

“Despite the strong international guidelines, many Nigerian children are still vulnerable to abuse and exploitation due to a dysfunctional enforcement mechanism of local agencies and a lack of personnel trained in this area within social-welfare agencies” (Save the Children, 2020; Plan International, 2021).

These remarks indicate that despite the fact that international child-protection structures offer crucial guidance and normative standards, their efficacy in Nigeria is affected by the strength of national establishments, professional training and availability of social workers, as well as incorporation of local culture and social settings into the policy execution. The national laws and policies are therefore guided by international agreements, but need strong local structures and professional practice to deliver significant protection to the Nigerian children.

Theme 3: Child Welfare and Protection Programmes in Nigeria

Child welfare and protection programmes in Nigeria form the working component of child protection in the country, bringing to reality legal frameworks and policies and putting into practice the measures that protect children against abuse and neglect, exploitation, and other vulnerabilities. Such programmes are being introduced using a blend of government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based initiatives, which represent a multi-level approach to child welfare. Interventions under the government include child protection services under the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, family support, and rehabilitation centres of children requiring care and protection (Ife, 2016; Nwanna, 2018). The roles of these institutions include investigating abuse cases, giving temporary shelter to the affected children, providing access to education and healthcare, and ensuring that the rights of the children are enforced. They have to coordinate with law enforcement systems and judicial systems.

These initiatives are supplemented by development organizations, including Plan International, Save the Children and UNICEF Nigeria, which also run community-based programmes including child-awareness campaigns, parental education, and community surveillance of vulnerable children (Okoye, 2022; UNICEF, 2022). These efforts are especially necessary in accessing children in rural or risky locations, so that protection and welfare services are available in the rural population as well as the urban centres, where traditional social organization can be vital in child care and maintenance.

Besides the statutory programmes and the NGO-led ones, family support and rehabilitation are also an important part of child welfare in Nigeria. The family support programmes are meant to enhance the skills of parents and caregivers by counselling, parenting education and access to social services, which reduce the risk of neglect and abuse (Healy, 2014; Payne, 2021). The rehabilitation programmes target children who have been abused, exploited, or traumatized and provide psychosocial support, educational catch-up, and skills development to enable them to integrate into society (Dominelli, 2018; Okoye, 2022).

The community-based child welfare projects also utilize the local institutions, like traditional councils, women's associations, and youth groups, to detect at-risk children, keep track of their health, and notify the relevant authorities about the cases of abuse. For instance, in Lagos State, the Lagos State Child Protection Network coordinates efforts between government agencies, NGOs, and community volunteers to provide child protection services at the grassroots level, and thus, shows how the coordination of multiple actors can expand the coverage of child protection services and increase the efficacy of welfare delivery (Akwara, Soyibo & Agba, 2019). Taken together, these programmes can be seen as a holistic approach to child protection which draws on legal, institutional and community resources to achieve a comprehensive support of vulnerable children and also make the interventions responsive to the varied needs of children in Nigeria.

Gaps and Challenges in Existing Child Protection Policies and Social Work Interventions in Nigeria

The national welfare system has structural and functional loopholes which have a substantial influence on the efficiency of child-protection policies and interventions of a social worker in Nigeria. Despite the clear legal rules, such as the Child Rights Act and the Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act, their practice is often undermined by non-homogeneous domestication among the federal states and unequal enforcement policies (Alemika & Chukwuma, 2018; Nwanya, 2018). The protection of children is not ensured by the legal provisions, but rather by the translation of the law into practical, operational programmes and effective supervision that defines real outcomes (Okoye, 2022, p. 56). This finding reveals the key fault in the child protection system in Nigeria, where the powerful legal tools are on paper and fail due to the lack of institutional capacity, insufficient funding, and poor coordination of agencies dealing with child welfare (Healy, 2014; Payne, 2021).

Additionally, social workers, who have to carry out child protection policies, are often faced with bureaucratic limitations, role ambiguity, and a lack of training, which limit their capacity to provide interventions in time and effectively (Dominelli, 2018; Akwara, Soyibo & Agba, 2019). According to a social worker interviewed in a nationwide child protection study, "most instances of abuse go unaddressed even when the law is clear, as the system is overstretched, understaffed, and dysfunctional" (Nwanna, 2018, p. 44). This assertion reinforces the fact that loopholes in operational capability are major threats to the efficiency of the available child protection systems.

Along with institutional constraints, socio-cultural aspects and practices at the community level are also problematic for child protection in Nigeria. Child protection policies are usually the same in all communities across the country, but local cultural norms and customary practices prevent the effectiveness of the policy. Early marriage, child

labour, and corporal punishment are also social issues in certain areas, and even though the practice has been banned by the national laws, there is a set of conflicting practices between the statutes and the social norms (Nwanna, 2018; Okoye, 2022). Scholars have suggested that social-work interventions are forced to act in complex cultural settings, and the norms of families and communities are opposed to the official legal requirements (Healy, 2014, p. 103).

Resistance to reporting abuse in the community or ignorance of child rights may hinder the provision of protective interventions in time, as well as decrease the coverage of social welfare programmes (UNICEF, 2022; Dominelli, 2018). It proves that the gaps in the child protection system in Nigeria are not merely structural, but also social-cultural in nature, whereby social workers need to undertake advocacy, education and community mobilization efforts to augment the formal legal and institutional interventions.

Additionally, the gaps in policy and programmes are reflected in the design of the child protection, its monitoring and evaluation. Although there are a few child welfare programmes such as family support services, rehabilitation centres, and community-based initiatives, research studies show that the programmes are usually fragmented, under-funded, and poorly coordinated at federal, state, and local levels (Akwara *et al.*, 2019; Nwanna, 2018). The monitoring and evaluation systems are ineffective, and it restricts the potential to measure the results, locate the bottlenecks, and enhance the programme delivery (Okoye, 2022; Payne, 2021).

According to reports of international development agencies, numerous interventions are highly dependent on donor funding, which impacts sustainability and institutional ownership, and leaves children vulnerable when external aid is no longer provided (Save the Children, 2020; Plan International, 2021). A child protection consultant pointed out that it is not just that there are policies, but their full operationalization, proper resourcing, and regular monitoring are required to have a real impact on child welfare (Save the Children, 2020, p. 32). A combination of these structural, cultural, and operational discrepancies underlines the multidimensionality of the issue of child protection policies and social work interventions in Nigeria and reinforces the idea of the need to systemically improve the current state of affairs and increase professional capacity and coordination of the institutions to ensure that the rights and well being of children are fully preserved.

The Roles and Responsibilities of Social Workers in Child Protection

Theme 1: Social Workers as Direct Service Providers in Child Protection

In Nigeria, social workers play a central role because they are direct service providers in the child protection process, which involves interpreting statutory provisions and policy mandates into workable interventions that can protect children against abuse, neglect, and exploitation. The social workers are tasked according to the Child Rights Act and institutional reports by the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development, which mandate that they investigate the report of abuse, evaluate the level of child-risk, and organize the immediate protection measures that may include temporary shelter and medical services (Nwanna, 2018). They also have the role of providing psychosocial assistance to children affected, reintegration and integration into safe family or community environments, and connection to education and health services to advance holistic wellbeing (Okoye, 2022; Akwara, Soyibo & Agba, 2019).

Ideally, social workers are guided by professional values and procedural laws that outline how to conduct systematic assessment, management of cases and follow-up, which in effect ensure that intervention is timely, effective, and in line with legal and ethical requirements. One report by the UNICEF highlights that a child at risk is engaged professionally through social workers who are often the gateway to the child being taken out of danger and the care to be given to them to heal (UNICEF, 2022, p. 28). This proves that the operationality of the social workers is key towards the direct safeguarding of children and the efficient adoption of the laws of child protection in Nigeria.

Along with direct protective measures, the social workers will be involved in case management and monitoring, so that the children who have suffered abuse or neglect end up receiving continuous care and assistance. They also carry regular follow-ups, organize activities with health professionals, schools, and community-based organizations and document the cases to report them to institutional records and policy reviews (Healy, 2014; Dominelli, 2018). According to Akwara *et al.*, (2019), social workers also enable family counselling and parental education programmes to avoid further damage, thus proving a proactive attitude to child welfare.

According to Okoye (2022, p. 63), social workers are likely to be the intermediary between vulnerable children and formal protection services and offer advice, assistance, and treatment in a manner that cannot be achieved by the community members themselves. Through integrating investigative, supportive and coordination functions, social workers operationalise child protection policies, hence guaranteeing children at risk immediate care and full recovery. Their interventions are the ideal representation of the translation of national legal frameworks into eligible services to support the safety, health, and development of children throughout Nigeria.

Theme 2: Social Workers as Coordinators, Advocates, and Policy Implementers

Social workers in Nigeria have a critical role in the child protection system at large, both in direct service provision, policy coordination and policy implementation. Social workers have a role to play by ensuring the coordination of multiple agencies, such as the police, courts, health institutions, and NGOs, to ensure that the laws regarding child protection are well implemented and that interventions are also timely and integrated (Healy, 2014; Dominelli, 2018; Payne, 2021). In such a role, social workers act as the main contact between the institutions and the community they operate in to provide information flow and abuse reporting, as well as ensuring that children are provided with the most protection possible and constantly. Social workers in most cases serve as the link between vulnerable children and legal, medical, and psychosocial services to coordinate interventions and implement protective measures in multiple systems (Okoye, 2022, p. 71). The social workers, through such coordination, can strengthen the efficiency of child protection systems whereby the responsibilities and duties of the different agencies are well defined and operationalized to reduce duplication of work and lack of service delivery.

Besides, social workers are the policy implementers and campaigns for children's rights. Social workers need to function in the best interest of vulnerable children, create awareness regarding the need to protect and safeguard children, and participate in designing and assessing programmes aimed at preventing abuse, neglect, and child exploitation as per the policies required to be followed, including the Child Rights Act and the institutional guidelines (Nwanna, 2018; Payne, 2021). Social workers do not just enforce the existing laws on child protection, as observed by Dominelli (2018, p. 92), but they also influence the policies through evidence-based suggestions based on their field experiences. Social workers can play a strategic role in the institutionalization of child protection standards through advocacy, inter-agency coordination and policy execution so that not just the rights of children are respected at the point of intervention, but also by the continued enhancement of the child welfare system in Nigeria.

Policy Implications

Originally, despite providing a solid legislative base, i.e., extensive laws like the Child Rights Act, the Violence against Persons (Prohibition) Act, as well as the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, their effectiveness requires the regular cases of domestication, effective enforcement, and interstate coordination. In this respect, the Federal Ministry of Justice, state Attorneys General and the Ministry of Women Affairs and Social Development should work together in ensuring a law-uniform implementation, installation of monitoring and enforcement at the local government levels.

Secondly, there should be an emphasis on policy changes about training, deploying, and empowering professional social workers and providing them with the tools and skills to research abuse, provide psychosocial assistance, and implement rehabilitation programs. Mainly, the National Social Welfare Service, state social welfare departments and professional associations like the Nigerian Association of Social Workers have this to do; they need to devise continuing professional development programmes, standardized protocols and operation guidelines.

Thirdly, the essence of aligning the national policies with the international standards of child protection i.e. the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, indicates the need for multi-agency coordination and involvement of the community. Through concerted efforts by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs together with the Ministry of Women Affairs, non-governmental organizations, as well as community-based organizations should promote the use of evidence-based practices, conduct stakeholder workshops and introduce participatory child-protection programmes.

Finally, strategies should be improved to promote inter-sectoral coordination and strengthen the capacity of the grassroots by taking advantage of the local structures, NGOs, and family-support programmes to expand access to protective services. The Ministry of Women's Affairs and local government social welfare units should work together with the civil society organizations to design community sensitization, reporting and monitoring systems, in ensuring that child-protection interventions are culturally responsive, inclusive and effective. These recommendations would bring about a more unified, professional and responsive child-protection system that can protect vulnerable children across Nigeria.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this paper illustrates that Nigeria has developed an extensive legal and institutional framework regarding child protection, which is supported by legal and international conventions and social-work interventions. However, the effectiveness of such frameworks depends on the stable enforcement of the policies, professional empowerment of social workers, multi-agency co-operation, and community involvement. By reinforcing them, it will be guaranteed that child-protection mechanisms are not only legally good but also functionally efficient in protecting the rights, well-being, and growth of vulnerable children throughout the country.

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