



Media, Culture, and Child Protection in Nigeria: Deconstructing Norms and the Limits of Rights-Based Journalism

Timothy Ekeledirichukwu Onyejelem

Department of Journalism and Media Studies, Federal University Otuoke, Bayelsa State

Abstract: *This study interrogates the complex intersection of media, culture, and child protection in Nigeria, highlighting the persistent tension between culturally embedded norms and the universalist ideals underpinning rights-based journalism. Despite Nigeria's formal commitment to safeguarding children through frameworks such as the Child Rights Act and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, widespread violations including child abuse, labour, early marriage, and stigmatization remain deeply normalized within socio-cultural contexts. Anchored in Framing Theory, the paper examines how media narratives construct, reinforce, or challenge these cultural logics by selectively emphasizing particular interpretations of child-related issues. It argues that media framing in Nigeria is not neutral but is shaped by institutional constraints, commercial pressures, and dominant cultural beliefs, which often limit the transformative potential of rights-based journalism. The study adopts a qualitative methodology based on secondary data, drawing from peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, legal instruments, and reports from organizations such as UNICEF, alongside analyses of media practices in Nigeria. Findings reveal that while the media serves as a critical platform for advocacy and agenda-setting, it simultaneously reproduces societal norms through episodic reporting, sensationalism, and the marginalization of children's voices. Furthermore, cultural mediation significantly influences both the interpretation of child protection and the framing of such issues in media discourse, often blurring the boundaries between discipline and abuse. The paper concludes that although rights-based journalism provides a strong normative framework for ethical reporting, its practical application in Nigeria is constrained by entrenched cultural values and structural limitations. It therefore calls for more context-sensitive, child-centred, and ethically grounded media practices that can effectively challenge harmful norms and advance the protection of children's rights.*

Keywords: *Media framing, child protection, rights-based journalism, cultural norms and media ethics.*

I. Introduction

The intersection of media, culture, and child protection in Nigeria presents a complex and often contradictory terrain where normative values, institutional frameworks, and journalistic practices collide. At the heart of this intersection lies a persistent tension between culturally embedded social norms and the universalist ideals underpinning rights-based journalism. While Nigeria has formally committed to protecting children through legal and policy instruments such as the Child Rights Act, the lived realities of many Nigerian children reveal deep structural and cultural impediments that undermine these protections (Onyejelem & Nwokeocha, 2024). Evidence Onyejelem (2023) indicates that violence against children remains pervasive, with as many as six out of ten children experiencing some form of abuse, often normalized within familial and community settings. These realities are not merely incidental but are deeply rooted in socio-cultural belief systems that shape perceptions of childhood, discipline, gender roles, and authority.

Within this context, the media occupies a paradoxical position. On one hand, it functions as a critical agent of socialization and advocacy, with the capacity to shape public discourse, influence policy, and amplify the voices of vulnerable populations (Ekeh et al., 2024). Initiatives involving institutions such as UNICEF and the Nigerian Guild of Editors underscore the recognition of media as a strategic partner in advancing children's rights and promoting ethical reporting standards. On the other hand, media practice in Nigeria is often constrained by structural pressures, commercial imperatives, and ideological biases that limit its capacity to fully embody the principles of rights-based journalism. Journalists frequently navigate a terrain shaped by ownership interests, political influence, and audience expectations, all of which can dilute the normative commitment to child-centered reporting (Englund, 2011).

More critically, the cultural environment within which Nigerian media operates exerts a profound influence on how child protection issues are framed and understood. Harmful traditional practices such as child marriage, corporal punishment, and stigmatization linked to beliefs in witchcraft or disability continue to shape societal attitudes toward children. In extreme cases, deeply entrenched cultural beliefs have even legitimized practices such as infanticide, sustained by secrecy and communal denial, thereby complicating advocacy and intervention efforts. These cultural logics often conflict with the normative assumptions of rights-based journalism, which prioritizes the dignity, agency, and best interests of the child. Consequently, journalists are frequently confronted with the dilemma of negotiating between respecting cultural sensitivities and challenging harmful practices that violate children's rights.

The limits of rights-based journalism in Nigeria therefore become evident in the gap between normative ideals and practical realities. While ethical guidelines emphasize sensitivity, accuracy, and the protection of children's identities, their implementation is uneven and often undermined by limited training, weak institutional enforcement, and broader societal contradictions. Studies have shown that journalists encounter significant challenges in reporting child rights issues, particularly when cultural and religious beliefs conflict with statutory provisions. Furthermore, the imperative to protect children can sometimes be compromised by sensationalism, inadequate contextualization, or the marginalization of children's own voices in media narratives.

Yet, despite these constraints, the evolving media landscape in Nigeria also offers opportunities for transformative engagement. Increasing collaboration between media institutions, government agencies, and international organizations has led to growing emphasis on ethical reporting and child-centered communication. Training initiatives and advocacy campaigns have reinforced the idea that journalism is not merely a tool for information dissemination but a moral enterprise with the potential to safeguard vulnerable populations. As stakeholders continue to call for more responsible and empathetic reporting practices, the media is gradually being repositioned as a crucial site for contesting harmful norms and advancing a culture of child protection (Koroma, 2023).

Thus, understanding media, culture, and child protection in Nigeria requires a critical deconstruction of the normative frameworks that govern both societal practices and journalistic engagement. It demands an interrogation of how cultural values are reproduced, challenged, or negotiated within media spaces, and how these processes shape the possibilities and limitations of rights-based journalism. The Nigerian case thus illustrates not only the transformative potential of the media but also its embeddedness within broader socio-cultural structures that both enable and constrain the realization of children's rights.

The justification for this paper is anchored in the persistent disjuncture between Nigeria's formal commitment to child protection and the socio-cultural realities that continue to undermine it. Despite the domestication of the Child Rights Act and Nigeria's obligations under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, violations such as child abuse, exploitation, and neglect remain widespread and, in many cases, culturally rationalized. This paradox highlights a critical need to interrogate not only legal and policy frameworks but also the cultural logics that sustain harmful practices. By examining how norms around discipline, gender, and authority are constructed and reproduced, the study provides a deeper understanding of why rights-based protections often fail to translate into lived realities for Nigerian children (Onyejelem et al., 2015).

Equally important is the need to critically evaluate the role of the media as both a site of advocacy and a conduit of cultural reproduction. While the media is frequently positioned as a watchdog and a defender of vulnerable populations, its practices are often shaped by commercial pressures, political influences, and entrenched societal values. Organizations such as UNICEF and the Nigerian Guild of Editors have emphasized ethical reporting on children, yet empirical evidence suggests that coverage of child protection issues remains sporadic, sensationalized, or culturally constrained (Okafor et al., 2023). This study is therefore justified in its attempt to deconstruct how media narratives frame child rights issues, whose voices are prioritized or marginalized, and how journalistic routines may inadvertently reinforce the very norms they seek to challenge.

Furthermore, the paper is necessary in light of the evolving media ecosystem and the increasing urgency of child protection concerns in Nigeria. The proliferation of digital platforms has expanded the reach and immediacy of information, but it has also intensified the risks of misrepresentation, privacy violations, and the commodification of children's suffering. At the same time, there is a growing global emphasis on rights-based journalism as a normative framework for ethical reporting. However, its applicability within culturally diverse contexts like Nigeria remains underexplored. By interrogating the limits of this framework within the Nigerian socio-cultural milieu, the study contributes to both scholarly debates and practical interventions, offering context-sensitive insights that can inform policy, media training, and advocacy strategies aimed at strengthening child protection.

II. Review of Literatures

2.1 Theoretical Underpinning

The paper adopted Framing Theory, originally advanced by scholars such as Erving Goffman and later developed in media studies by scholars like Robert Entman. Framing Theory explains how media and communication actors select certain aspects of reality and make them more salient in a text, thereby promoting specific problem definitions, causal interpretations, moral evaluations, and treatment recommendations. In other words, the media does not simply reflect reality; it actively constructs it through patterns of emphasis, omission, and interpretation. This theoretical lens is particularly useful for understanding how child protection issues are presented in Nigeria, where media narratives are shaped not only by journalistic routines but also by cultural norms, institutional constraints, and ethical considerations (Ademosu et al., 2025).

In the context of Media, Culture, and Child Protection in Nigeria: Deconstructing Norms and the Limits of Rights-Based Journalism, Framing Theory helps explain why child-related issues are often portrayed in ways that either reinforce or challenge existing cultural beliefs. For example, when the media frames child labour as a consequence of poverty and family survival strategies, it may reduce public pressure for structural reform and inadvertently normalize the practice. Conversely, when framed as exploitation and a violation of the Child Rights Act or the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, it becomes a human rights issue that demands urgent intervention. These framing choices directly influence how audiences interpret the legitimacy of cultural practices and the urgency of child protection responses (Ezeonyejiaku & Onyejelem, 2021).

Framing Theory also exposes the limitations of rights-based journalism in culturally complex environments like Nigeria. While rights-based journalism aspires to universal ethical standards that prioritize children's dignity, participation, and protection, media framing is often constrained by dominant cultural narratives that define acceptable childhood behaviour and discipline. For instance, corporal punishment may be framed as "discipline" rather than "violence," reflecting deeply embedded cultural norms that conflict with international child rights standards. This demonstrates how cultural frames can override rights-based frames in shaping public understanding, thereby limiting the transformative potential of journalism (Aondover & Ademosu, 2025).

Framing Theory highlights the issue of voice and representation in child-centred reporting. The way journalists frame stories often determines whose perspectives are included or excluded. When media narratives rely heavily on institutional voices—such as government officials, teachers, or caregivers—children's lived experiences may be filtered or silenced. This framing choice reinforces power hierarchies in communication and undermines the participatory ideals of rights-based journalism. At the same time, when children are included as direct sources, the framing shifts toward a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of their realities, though this must be carefully managed to ensure ethical protection (Aondover & Obasi, 2025).

Applying Framing Theory to this topic reveals that media practice in Nigeria is not neutral but is deeply embedded in cultural meaning systems and power relations. It shows how child protection issues are constructed, contested, and sometimes constrained within competing frames of culture, law, and journalism ethics. By exposing these dynamics, the theory provides a powerful analytical tool for deconstructing norms and understanding why rights-based journalism, despite its normative strength, often struggles to fully transform child protection discourse in Nigeria (Aondover et al., 2024).

Framing Theory provides a critical analytical foundation for this study on Media, Culture, and Child Protection in Nigeria: Deconstructing Norms and the Limits of Rights-Based Journalism by explaining how media narratives construct and contest meanings around childhood, protection, and rights within culturally embedded contexts (Aondover et al., 2026). It demonstrates that journalistic representations of child-related issues are not neutral but are shaped by selective emphasis, cultural assumptions, and institutional constraints that influence whether practices such as child labour, corporal punishment, or early marriage are interpreted as cultural norms or as violations of the Child Rights Act and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. By highlighting how these framing choices either reinforce dominant cultural narratives or advance rights-based perspectives, the theory directly supports

the paper's aim of deconstructing societal norms and exposing the limitations of rights-based journalism in Nigeria's complex socio-cultural environment.

III. Methodology

The paper employed Secondary data whereby the existing literature was drawn from multiple credible sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, policy documents, legal instruments such as the Child Rights Act and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, reports from international organizations such as UNICEF, and relevant media content and scholarly analyses on child protection and journalism practices in Nigeria.

3.1 Rights-based Journalism

Rights-based journalism is a normative and ethical framework that situates journalism within the broader project of advancing human rights, social justice, and democratic accountability. It departs from conventional models of reporting that prioritize neutrality or mere information dissemination by insisting that journalists have a responsibility to foreground issues of dignity, equity, and the protection of vulnerable populations (Mohammed & Aondover, 2025). At its core, rights-based journalism is anchored in international human rights standards, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes children as rights-holders entitled to survival, development, protection, and participation. Within this framework, journalism is not simply an observer of social realities but an active participant in shaping discourse, influencing policy, and holding power to account for rights violations.

The operational logic of rights-based journalism emphasizes key principles such as accuracy, fairness, accountability, and sensitivity, but extends these to include a deliberate focus on marginalized voices and structural inequalities (Aondover et al., 2025). It encourages journalists to move beyond episodic reporting toward more contextual, investigative, and explanatory storytelling that reveals the systemic causes of social problems. In the context of child protection, this means not only reporting incidents of abuse or neglect but also interrogating the socio-economic, cultural, and institutional factors that enable such violations. It also requires careful ethical considerations, including protecting the identity and dignity of children, avoiding re-traumatization, and ensuring that coverage does not inadvertently reinforce stigma or harm (Maradun & Aondover, 2025).

In practice, rights-based journalism seeks to reframe how stories are told by centering the experiences and agency of affected individuals, particularly those who are often excluded from mainstream narratives. It promotes participatory approaches that give voice to children and other vulnerable groups, recognizing them not merely as victims but as active contributors to public discourse. However, this ideal is often challenged by the realities of media practice, especially in contexts like Nigeria where journalists operate under constraints such as political pressure, commercial imperatives, limited resources, and cultural sensitivities. These factors can lead to compromises in ethical standards, selective reporting, or the prioritization of sensational stories over in-depth analysis.

Thus, rights-based journalism must contend with the tension between universal human rights norms and local cultural values (Aondover, 2024). While the framework advocates for the protection of rights as universal and inalienable, its implementation often requires navigating complex cultural landscapes where certain practices may be socially accepted despite violating established rights standards. This tension is particularly evident in

reporting on child-related issues, where journalists may face resistance from communities or institutions when challenging entrenched beliefs and practices. As such, rights-based journalism in Nigeria is not only a professional practice but also a site of negotiation, where global norms are interpreted and contested within local contexts (Koroma, 2023).

Rights-based journalism represents both an aspirational ideal and a practical challenge. It calls for a reorientation of journalistic purpose toward public interest and human dignity, while also demanding institutional support, professional training, and ethical commitment from media practitioners. In the Nigerian context, its relevance is heightened by ongoing concerns about child protection, social inequality, and governance. By aligning journalistic practice with human rights principles, rights-based journalism has the potential to contribute meaningfully to social transformation, even as it continues to grapple with the structural and cultural limits that shape its application.

3.2 Cultural Mediation of Child Protection

Cultural mediation of child protection refers to the process through which cultural beliefs, values, norms, and social institutions shape the understanding, interpretation, and implementation of measures aimed at safeguarding children. Rather than viewing child protection as a purely legal or policy-driven enterprise, this concept emphasizes that the effectiveness of protective frameworks is deeply influenced by the cultural environments in which they operate. In Nigeria, child protection practices are often filtered through communal worldviews, religious doctrines, kinship systems, and traditional authority structures that define what is considered acceptable or unacceptable treatment of children (Onyejelem et al., 2023). As a result, the meaning of “protection” itself is not fixed but socially constructed, negotiated, and sometimes contested within specific cultural contexts.

This mediation becomes particularly evident when global and national legal standards intersect with local practices. Instruments such as the Child Rights Act and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child articulate universal principles regarding the rights and welfare of children. However, their implementation often encounters resistance or reinterpretation at the community level, where cultural norms may legitimize practices such as corporal punishment, early marriage, or strict hierarchical obedience. In such contexts, actions defined legally as abuse may be perceived socially as discipline or moral upbringing, thereby complicating enforcement and advocacy efforts. Cultural mediation, therefore, highlights the gap between normative legal frameworks and lived social realities (Okafor et al., 2023).

At the same time, cultural mediation is not inherently negative; it can also serve as a resource for strengthening child protection when positive cultural values are mobilized. Many Nigerian communities possess indigenous systems of care, communal responsibility, and moral upbringing that can reinforce protective mechanisms for children. Extended family networks, for instance, often provide social safety nets that support children’s welfare in ways that formal institutions may not. The challenge lies in distinguishing between cultural practices that enhance child well-being and those that perpetuate harm, and in finding culturally sensitive ways to reform or transform the latter without alienating communities.

Within the media landscape, cultural mediation plays a crucial role in shaping how child protection issues are reported and understood. Journalists operate within the same cultural milieu as their audiences, which influences the framing of stories, the language used, and the willingness to challenge harmful norms. Media narratives may either reinforce cultural justifications for certain practices or critically interrogate them in light of human rights

standards. Consequently, the media becomes a key arena where cultural meanings of child protection are negotiated, contested, and potentially transformed (Koroma, 2023).

Cultural mediation of child protection underscores the importance of context-sensitive approaches to safeguarding children. It calls for an integration of legal frameworks, cultural understanding, and communicative strategies that acknowledge the complexity of social norms while upholding the fundamental rights and dignity of the child. In the Nigerian context, this concept is essential for explaining why child protection efforts often face limitations and for identifying pathways through which culturally grounded yet rights-oriented interventions can be developed and sustained (Onyejelem et al., 2021).

Cultural mediation of child protection can be clearly seen in the widespread acceptance of corporal punishment as a legitimate form of discipline in many Nigerian homes and schools. While legal and rights-based frameworks such as the Child Rights Act discourage violence against children, cultural beliefs often frame physical punishment as necessary for moral upbringing and respect for authority. In this context, what is defined legally as abuse may be socially normalized as discipline, thereby limiting both reporting and enforcement. Teachers, parents, and even children themselves may internalize these norms, making it difficult for media and advocacy institutions to challenge such practices without appearing to undermine cultural values.

Another example is child marriage, which persists in some parts of Nigeria despite national and international prohibitions under instruments like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. In certain communities, early marriage is culturally justified as a means of preserving family honor, ensuring economic security, or fulfilling religious expectations. Here, cultural mediation shapes not only the practice itself but also how it is reported and discussed in the media (Kojah et al., 2025). Journalists may either avoid the topic due to its sensitivity or frame it in ways that reflect prevailing cultural justifications rather than critically interrogating its implications for the rights and well-being of the child.

Cultural mediation is also evident in the stigmatization of children accused of witchcraft, particularly in some southern Nigerian communities. Such beliefs, deeply rooted in local cosmologies, have led to cases of abandonment, abuse, and social exclusion of affected children. Despite legal protections, community members—including caregivers—may perceive these actions as justified responses to perceived spiritual threats. Media coverage of such cases often reflects a tension between exposing human rights violations and navigating deeply held cultural and religious beliefs. This illustrates how cultural frameworks can both obscure and legitimize harmful practices, complicating child protection efforts.

At the same time, cultural mediation can have positive dimensions, as seen in the role of extended family systems in child care. In many Nigerian communities, child upbringing is considered a collective responsibility, with relatives and community members stepping in to support children in times of need. This communal approach can enhance child protection by providing informal safety nets that complement formal systems. However, even this practice is culturally mediated, as it may sometimes blur accountability or expose children to exploitation under the guise of fostering or apprenticeship.

In this context, cultural mediation is reflected in media reporting practices themselves. Journalists, influenced by societal norms and audience expectations, may choose narratives that align with dominant cultural values rather than rights-based perspectives. For instance,

stories about child labour may be framed as resilience or economic necessity rather than exploitation, especially in contexts of widespread poverty. This demonstrates how media not only reports on child protection issues but also participates in shaping the cultural meanings that define them, reinforcing the need for a critical and context-aware approach to rights-based journalism.

3.3 Media Framing of Child Rights

Media framing of child rights refers to the processes through which media institutions select, organize, and present issues affecting children in ways that shape public understanding, policy responses, and societal attitudes. Drawing from framing theory, the media does not merely report events as neutral facts; it actively constructs meanings by emphasizing certain aspects of reality while downplaying others. In the context of child rights, framing determines whether children are portrayed as victims in need of protection, offenders requiring discipline, or active agents with voices and rights. These representational choices influence how audiences interpret issues such as child abuse, child labour, education, and health, and ultimately affect the urgency and nature of institutional responses (Onyejelem & Ridwan, 2025).

Within the Nigerian context, media framing of child rights is deeply intertwined with legal, cultural, and political dynamics. Frameworks such as the Child Rights Act and global standards like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provide normative guidelines for protecting children, yet media representations do not always align with these principles. For instance, reports on child abuse may adopt episodic frames that focus on isolated incidents rather than thematic frames that interrogate systemic causes such as poverty, weak institutions, or cultural practices (Onyejelem, 2020). This episodic tendency can limit public understanding by presenting violations as aberrations rather than as manifestations of broader structural issues requiring sustained intervention.

Media framing also reflects and reproduces prevailing cultural norms. In societies where practices such as corporal punishment or child labour are normalized, media narratives may implicitly justify or trivialize such practices by presenting them as part of everyday life or economic survival. Conversely, in cases that attract public outrage, the media may resort to sensational framing that emphasizes shock value over contextual analysis. Such sensationalism can generate temporary attention but often fails to sustain meaningful discourse or policy change. Moreover, the framing of child rights issues is influenced by editorial priorities, ownership structures, and commercial pressures, which may prioritize stories that attract audiences rather than those that require nuanced, investigative reporting.

An important dimension of media framing of child rights is the question of voice and representation. Children are frequently represented as passive subjects whose experiences are narrated by adults—journalists, policymakers, or caregivers—rather than being given the opportunity to articulate their own perspectives. This absence of children's voices can reinforce their marginalization and limit the depth of reporting. A rights-based framing, by contrast, emphasizes participation, ensuring that children are recognized as rights-holders with agency, in line with the principles of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. However, incorporating children's voices requires careful ethical considerations to protect their identity, dignity, and well-being (Bakhtiar, 2023).

Media framing of child rights is a powerful communicative process that shapes not only what is known about children's issues but also how these issues are valued and addressed

within society. In Nigeria, the effectiveness of media framing is contingent upon the ability of journalists to navigate the tensions between professional ethics, cultural expectations, and structural constraints. A critical engagement with media framing reveals both its transformative potential in advancing child protection and its limitations in contexts where cultural norms and institutional pressures shape the boundaries of journalistic practice.

3.4 Representation and Voice in Child-centered Reporting

Representation and voice in child-centered reporting refers to the ways in which children are portrayed in media narratives and the extent to which they are allowed to speak for themselves within journalistic practice. It is a critical concept within media ethics and rights-based journalism because it determines whether children are treated as passive objects of concern or as active subjects with agency, dignity, and perspectives worth hearing. In child-centered reporting, representation goes beyond simply showing or describing children; it involves carefully constructing narratives that reflect their lived realities without distortion, exploitation, or sensationalism. Voice, on the other hand, concerns the inclusion of children's direct expressions, experiences, and viewpoints in media content, ensuring that they are not merely spoken about by adults but are meaningfully heard in public discourse.

In many media environments, including Nigeria, representation of children is often shaped by adult-centric perspectives that filter children's experiences through institutional, cultural, or editorial lenses. As a result, children are frequently depicted as victims of abuse, poverty, or neglect, or as symbolic figures used to evoke emotional responses from audiences. While such portrayals may draw attention to important social issues, they can also reinforce stereotypes that deny children complexity and agency (Onyejelem, 2025). This is particularly evident in reporting on issues such as child labour, street begging, or early marriage, where children are often presented as passive recipients of circumstance rather than individuals capable of expressing aspirations, resilience, or resistance. Such patterns of representation can inadvertently marginalize children further by reducing their identities to simplified narratives (Maiwada et al., 2025).

The issue of voice is closely linked to ethical considerations and professional standards in journalism (Vitalis et al., 2024). International frameworks such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child emphasize the right of children to express their views freely in matters affecting them, depending on their age and maturity. Rights-based journalism therefore encourages the inclusion of children's voices in reporting, but this must be balanced with the responsibility to protect their safety, privacy, and dignity. Journalists must navigate complex ethical questions, such as obtaining informed consent, avoiding re-traumatization, and ensuring that children are not exposed to harm or public scrutiny as a result of their participation in media narratives.

In practice, however, children's voices are often underrepresented in mainstream reporting due to structural and institutional constraints. Time pressures, lack of specialized training, cultural norms that prioritize adult authority, and concerns about ethical risks can all limit journalists' willingness or ability to engage directly with children as sources. Instead, reporters frequently rely on secondary voices such as parents, teachers, social workers, or government officials. While these intermediaries provide valuable context, their perspectives may overshadow or replace the authentic experiences of children themselves (Bakhtiar et al., 2023). This creates a gap between the ideals of child-centered reporting and its implementation in everyday journalistic practice.

At the same time, emerging media platforms and digital technologies offer new possibilities for enhancing representation and voice in child-centered reporting. Social media, participatory storytelling formats, and community-based journalism initiatives have created spaces where children can increasingly share their own experiences and perspectives. However, these opportunities also come with risks, including exposure to online harm, exploitation, and misrepresentation. Therefore, strengthening child-centered reporting requires not only ethical commitment from journalists but also institutional support, regulatory safeguards, and continuous training to ensure that children's representation is both empowering and protective.

Representation and voice in child-centered reporting are central to the broader goal of advancing child rights within media systems. When children are accurately and respectfully represented and given opportunities to express themselves, journalism becomes a more inclusive and democratic space that recognizes them as full members of society. In contexts like Nigeria, where cultural norms, institutional limitations, and ethical challenges intersect, improving representation and voice is essential for bridging the gap between rights-based ideals and media practice, and for ensuring that child protection narratives truly reflect the realities and aspirations of children themselves.

A clear example of representation and voice in child-centered reporting can be seen in media coverage of children affected by child labour in markets, farms, and urban informal sectors in Nigeria. In many reports, children engaged in street trading or domestic work are often depicted as victims of poverty and family hardship, with journalists relying heavily on adult voices such as parents, employers, or government officials to explain their circumstances. In such cases, the children themselves are rarely interviewed or allowed to express their experiences, aspirations, or understanding of their situation (Onyejelem, 2025). This results in a form of representation that, while highlighting an important social problem, often strips children of agency and reduces them to symbols of suffering rather than individuals with voices and perspectives. A rights-based approach, however, would involve ethically engaging these children where appropriate, ensuring consent and protection, while still allowing them to narrate their lived realities in their own words.

Again, the media reporting of cases involving child abuse or exploitation, particularly in schools or religious settings. Often, such stories are framed around official statements from police, school authorities, or child protection agencies, with minimal direct input from the affected children. Even when children are referenced, their identities and voices are frequently filtered through paraphrasing rather than direct quotation, largely due to ethical concerns about privacy and trauma. For instance, in cases of corporal punishment or alleged sexual abuse, journalists may avoid interviewing the child altogether, resulting in narratives dominated by institutional perspectives. While this approach is intended to protect the child, it can inadvertently silence their voice and limit public understanding of the emotional and psychological dimensions of their experiences. This highlights the tension between safeguarding children and ensuring meaningful participation in media narratives.

IV. Conclusion

This paper reveals a deeply complex and interconnected relationship between societal values, journalistic practice, and the protection of children's rights. Although Nigeria has established legal and policy frameworks such as the Child Rights Act and aligned itself with international standards like the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the lived realities of many children continue to reflect persistent violations shaped by entrenched cultural norms, weak institutional enforcement, and structural inequalities. Practices such as corporal punishment, child marriage, child labour, and stigmatization of vulnerable children demonstrate how cultural belief systems often mediate the interpretation of what constitutes protection, discipline, or abuse. Within this environment, child protection becomes not only a legal concern but also a culturally negotiated process that frequently challenges the effectiveness of formal rights-based frameworks.

The media occupies a pivotal but ambivalent position in this dynamic. On one hand, it serves as a powerful instrument for advocacy, agenda-setting, and social awareness, with the potential to amplify child protection issues and hold institutions accountable. On the other hand, media practice is shaped by cultural expectations, commercial pressures, political influences, and professional limitations that often constrain its ability to fully embrace rights-based journalism. Through framing choices, journalists either reinforce dominant cultural interpretations or challenge them by aligning narratives with human rights principles. However, the persistence of episodic reporting, sensationalism, and the marginalization of children's voices illustrates the limitations of current journalistic practices in consistently advancing child-centred perspectives. Consequently, the media simultaneously becomes a space for both the reproduction of cultural norms and the contestation of those norms.

The application of Framing Theory and rights-based journalism in this study demonstrates that media representations of child rights in Nigeria are neither neutral nor purely informational, but are shaped by complex interactions between culture, power, ethics, and institutional constraints. While rights-based journalism offers a strong normative foundation for ethical reporting and the protection of vulnerable groups, its implementation remains uneven within Nigeria's socio-cultural context. The continued tension between universal rights ideals and local cultural realities underscores the need for more context-sensitive, ethically grounded, and professionally supported media practices. Strengthening child-centred reporting, enhancing journalist training, and fostering greater cultural reflexivity are therefore essential steps toward bridging the gap between normative aspirations and practical realities. In doing so, the media can more effectively contribute to deconstructing harmful norms and advancing a more inclusive and protective environment for children in Nigeria.

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