

Media Representation of Child Abuse and Its Policy Implications in Nigeria

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Abstract:

Child abuse remains a significant social issue in Nigeria, with long-term consequences for victims and society. The media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception and policy responses to child abuse through its representation of cases, narratives, and framing of the issue. This study examines the media's portrayal of child abuse in Nigeria, exploring the extent to which news coverage, documentaries, and other forms of media representation influence public awareness, government action, and policy formulation. It analyzes the dominant themes in media reports, including sensationalism, victim-blaming, and advocacy-driven narratives, while assessing the ethical and professional standards maintained by journalists in reporting such cases. Findings suggest that while the media has been instrumental in bringing child abuse cases to public attention, coverage is often inconsistent, and sometimes lacks depth, context, and follow-up reporting. Sensationalized stories may attract public outrage but do not always translate into sustained policy action or structural reforms. Additionally, cultural biases and societal stigma influence the framing of child abuse cases, sometimes shifting the blame onto victims or downplaying the role of systemic failures. This paper argues that effective media representation of child abuse should go beyond episodic reporting to include investigative journalism, human-centered storytelling, and advocacy for policy change. It highlights the need for training journalists on ethical reporting of child abuse and calls for stronger collaboration.

Keywords:

Child Abuse, Media, Nigeria, Policy Implications, and Representation.

I. Introduction

Child abuse remains a critical social issue in Nigeria, with cases of neglect, physical violence, sexual exploitation, and child labor frequently reported. Despite legal frameworks such as the Child Rights Act (2003) and various international treaties ratified by Nigeria, enforcement remains weak due to systemic corruption, cultural practices, and a lack of political will. In this context, the media plays a crucial role in shaping public perception, influencing policy decisions, and holding government institutions accountable (Aondover et al., 2025).

The representation of child abuse in Nigerian media through news reports, investigative journalism, and social media advocacy has the power to drive policy changes and mobilize public action. However, media coverage often varies in depth, accuracy, and consistency, raising concerns about sensationalism, ethical reporting, and the actual impact on policy formulation

(Onyejelem et al., 2025). While some high-profile cases gain national attention, many instances of child abuse remain underreported or misrepresented, limiting the urgency for comprehensive policy intervention.

This study explores how Nigerian media portrays child abuse, the extent to which such representations influence government policies, and the challenges faced in ensuring ethical and impactful reporting. By analyzing media narratives, government responses, and policy shifts, this research seeks to understand the effectiveness of media advocacy in shaping child protection laws and their enforcement in Nigeria (Aondover et al., 2025). According to Kellogg et al. (2020), the concept of child abuse varies depending on the cultural situation. The term "brutality against children" refers to any act of physical violence committed against a person under the age of 18, regardless of whether it was carried out by a parent or another parental figure, peers, collaborators, teachers, or people from the outside. The alarming rise in the number of violent acts committed against children is a problem that affects society as a whole, as well as human rights and general wellness. According to Gabriel (2012)'s research, it is estimated that about one billion children between the ages of 2 and 17 have been subjected to some sort of abuse.

The concept of child abuse has been constructed on the premise that child abuse is linked to pain and actual damage to children, including difficulties related to post-traumatic stress disorder and attachment disorder (Vitalis et al., 2024). Abuse of children includes any sort of physical maltreatment, sexual maltreatment, or just plain disdain for the child's well-being. Children who are subjected to acts of physical or psychological abuse are said to have been subjected to displays of inclusion or exclusion, which serve as the foundation for the harm or remorse that the child experiences (Aliyu et al., 2023). According to Manyike et al. (2015), sexual violence is characterised by the child being used with the intention of providing sexual pleasure for the adult. It encompasses the violation of trust and loss of control that can occur in the course of relationships between adults and children. A situation is considered to be one of neglect when the adults who are supposed to be looking out for the children's best interests do not fulfil their most basic needs and wants. The concept of "resilience" refers to the ability of a child to bounce back from adverse experiences, such as physical or emotional abuse or exposure to increasingly dangerous environments, and yet achieve positive and adaptable outcomes. An increasing focus has been placed on the delivery of rapid intervention and preventative services. This shift in emphasis may be attributed to the growing recognition that enhancing preventative measures to prevent the abuse of children is not only feasible, but also delivers both societal and economic benefits.

II. Review of Literature

The social responsibility Theory was propounded in 1956 by Fred Siebert, Theodore Peterson, and Wilbur Schramm who were motivated by the landmark Hutchins Commission report headed by the then head of the University of Chicago, Robert Hutchins. At the core of social responsibility, theory lays the idea of public curiosity (Vitalis et al., 2024). Social responsibility is morals that control any activity, be it in media or different associations, which put a commitment towards the environment, society, culture, and economy. The media like some other sectors ought not to hurt, but ought to advance environment and socio-cultural aspects in line with the economy of the place.

According to Ojiakor and Etodike (2018), one of the essential precepts of the social responsibility theory is that the press should serve what is of interest to the public. In this way, it assumes that newspapers must have a social conscience, be committed to open government

assistance, and public service; they ought to be receptive to issues in society. Besides, the press must be responsible to "to their publics, to whom they owe accurate news reportage, investigation and editorializing. The practice of journalism to practice the respectable calling of journalism and is to acknowledge the profession to add to the advancement of society and be worried about the prosperity of society.

Ojiakor et al., (2019), states that social responsibility theory accentuates the freedom of the press and places obligation on the media specialists to submit by certain social guidelines. It counters media guidelines however accepts that the press is naturally constrained by community opinion, consumer protest, and professional ethics. For the press to viably and proficiently play out its job as the Fourth Estate of the Realm (begat by Thomas Jefferson), its freedom must be liberated, its freedom must be ensured and the government is relied upon to make no laws that will compress its freedom. The Nigerian press engages with the social responsibility theory which raises the ethical commitment of the media to think about the general needs and greater good of the society when making or taking the news, programme, and commercial/advertorial judgement or choice.

Foreman (2010) contends that principled journalists ought to be concerned not only with covering the news as well as with how their reporting will influence the individuals associated with a story, through the reportage of abuse in the newspapers, but people opinions would also be shaped and would be able to influence the society. Newspapers are pertinent to society in the sense that they advise the society by providing realities, sentiments, statistics, photographs, and illustrations on issues, occasions, or happenings that influence the society (Onyejelem, 2020). Newspapers have the ability to educate individuals in the society about issues that undermine their social presence, by going past the essential realities to top to bottom investigation through opinions pieces, feature stories, columns, and editorials. The role of social responsibility theory in reporting child abuse is for media organizations to ethically report and put in an obligation towards the environment, society and culture to sensitize the society on child abuse.

III. Research Method

3.1 Conceptualizing the Causes of Child Abuse

According to Olaitan and Oyeniya (2015), the African Charter on the Constitutional Rights and Wellbeing of a Child specifies that a child in any African environment holds a new and beneficial position. This is according to the fact that a child in any African setting possesses a unique and favourable position. The child should have the opportunity to go through childhood in a state of complete and absolute wealth, which should be provided by the family for the purpose of the child's complete and happy development of character. Due to the fragility and susceptibility of children, they are dependent on people for their care, protection, and security, as well as their capacity to continue living. According to Nwadiaro and Nkwocha (2011), many families do not offer the conditions necessary for children to reach their full potential in terms of physical and mental development.

The lack of grasp of children's needs, child development, and parenting skills on the part of guardians can be attributed to a variety of factors, including a young age, a poor level of education, paternity and maternity by single parents, a significant number of children, and low salary. One of the primary causes of child maltreatment is shown to originate inside the family. In most cases, the dysfunction in the family is the result of anger and conflict between the parents and other members of the family. According to Terr (2010), children who are raised in

households with low incomes, parents with low levels of education, parents who are jobless, or children who are raised by a single parent are at an increased risk of experiencing child abuse and neglect. Because of factors such as illiteracy and ignorance, some parents are unable of comprehending the risks associated with abusing their children (Aondover et al., 2024).

The United Nations (UN) designated Lagos a megacity after the city's population reached a threshold of 10 million residents, making it eligible for the designation. As a result of the rapid population growth in many less developed nations, which led to increasing unemployment rates, expansion, poor salaries, and unpleasant working conditions, there has been a rise in the number of instances of child abuse as youngsters attempt to help support their families (Akpan & Oluwabamide, 2010). This has led to an increase in the number of children who have been abused. The northerners in Nigeria, for instance, are notorious for early marriage and almajiris. At the family level, variables that contribute to child abuse include poverty. Environmental factors that contribute to child abuse include rural places where harmful cultural practises occur.

According to Abdulkadir et al. (2011), a 2003 ILO survey of child labour in Nigeria distinguished eight causes: the social impact, financial issues, national liability, inadequate training, joblessness or failure to cope, street life, and single parent families, with the last three factors aggravating poverty, household violence, and non-nuclear family structures. Child maltreatment is also a result of a lack of family planning. According to Meyer et al. (2017), the goal of family planning is to give parents the tools they need to have the number of children that corresponds with the amount of resources that they have available to adequately care for those children.

Equally, Akinlusi et al. (2014) notes that other factors that contribute to child abuse are monetary hardship, high numbers of children who are orphaned or abandoned, the modernization and invalidation of traditional values, disturbances in the formation of societies and the acceptance of certain practises, dishonesty, and the selection of children's protection agencies that are ethnically unrelated and ineffectively advanced.

3.2 Protective Factors of Child Abuse

The following factors, as suggested by Nathalie (2021), contribute to the reduction and prevention of child abuse:

- a. Both the upbringing of families and participation in public activities should be encouraged. When children are exposed to surroundings in which their fundamental requirements, such as food, drink, clothes, and shelter, are met, they develop more effectively. Another indicator of family structure is the proportion of abused children who have married biological parents, who provide the lowest possible risk of abusing their children.
- b. Skill development in parenting; parenting is a path in developing and aiding the physical, energetic, social, and intellectual advancement of a child beginning from the first stages and continuing on until the child reaches adulthood. The term "parenting" does not just relate to having a true relationship with one's offspring; rather, it alludes to the complexity involved in the process of rearing a child.
- c. Abuse of a child's emotional well-being is less likely to occur when there is stability in the relationships between the child's parents and his or her siblings. The lives of children who are raised in homes with considerate adults, as opposed to children who are raised with relatives who perceive themselves as role models or counsellors for the child, are marked for the better by the experiences such children have. It is important for parents to understand how to establish rules for their homes and to closely supervise their children in all of their activities. It is important for parents to take an interest in their children's day-to-day lives and activities, to

- get to know the significant others in their children's lives, and to educate their children appropriate boundaries and limitations regarding what they should and should not do.
- d. Parents who have completed a higher degree of education are more likely to have confidence in their own teaching abilities and to instill that confidence in their children. The information, convictions, traits, and goals that parents have about the raising of their children are all influenced by the degree of education that the parents have. As a result, a variety of parental behaviours may be inferred from the academic achievement of their children. When parents have a high level of knowledge, they are better equipped to advise and protect their children from all types of abuse. Abuse in a child can take the shape of either emotional neglect or emotional abuse when a parent is unemployed. This is because rage, violence, and sadness are all side effects of unemployment.
 - e. Orphanages are often the first option considered when it is determined that a child has to be removed from a potentially harmful environment. Foster homes, as opposed to orphanages, are becoming the solution of choice for children who have been neglected or abused because more research is being done on how children may be helped, and the value of the environment provided by families is being recognised. The most beneficial environment for a child is a permanent one, whether it be with his or her own family or with another family who supports them. As a result, youngsters nowadays begin to channel their concerns about their own families into a focus on how they may assist other families that are experiencing difficulties. It is imperative that proper medical care and social assistance be made available to every single child.

3.3 Types of Child Abuse

According to Akinsulire (2017), there are four different types of child abuse that are frequently recognised: neglect, physical abuse, sexual abuse, and psychological abuse.

a. Physical abuse

Physical abuse of children is one type of child abuse. The infliction of a corporal wound on a child by means of burning, slamming, smashing, quaking, kicking, beating, or otherwise injuring a child is considered to fall under this category. It is possible that in certain instances it is the result of excessive chastisement or practises that are generally accepted in society. This abuse also includes the use of physical force, in the form of beatings or other forms of corporal punishment, with the intention of inflicting some degree of suffering or distress on the victim. In spite of the widespread acceptance of societal norms, medical personnel ought to collaborate with parents in order to demoralise harmful behaviour and provide many other solutions that are more appropriate for the purpose of rectification (Hile et al., 2023). Child abuse may take the form of physical abuse; scholars are becoming increasingly interested in the issue of child abuse in developing nations because of the myriad of physiological, social, and economic repercussions it has on the people who engage in the trade (Kwagyang et al., 2016).

b. Sexual abuse

This refers to a wide range of behaviours that are carried out by an individual who is responsible for the safety of the child. These behaviours may involve varying degrees of physical and mental abuse, as well as psychological trauma. In most cases, when people talk about child sexual abuse, they are referring to sexual practises, expressly coerced sexual practises involving minors, or the sexual abuse of children. It may include sexual abuse, indecent exposure, petting, intercourse, oedipal love, assault, predication, or indecent exposure. It may also include presentation to pornographic entertainment. The majority of regular stories feature oedipal love, which is defined as sexual abuse between relatives. This can occur in biological families, foster homes, or step-families, among other types of families. The connection between a father and a

daughter is one of the most common ones in which incest takes place; however, other family members or carers may also be responsible for sexual abuse.

c. Neglect

This refers to the failure to provide the fundamental requirements of a child. Neglect can take many forms, including those that are physical, educational, or emotional. Neglecting someone physically might include not providing enough food or clothes, adequate clinical care, adequate supervision, or adequate protection from the elements, among other things. The failure to offer an acceptable education, enough attention to a child's specific educational requirements, or unwarranted permission to miss school is an example of educational neglect. According to Okur et al. (2017), psychological neglect occurs when a child is not provided with emotional support and affection, when the child is constantly distracted from, or when the child is exposed to hostile behaviour or substance and alcohol misuse.

d. Psychological abuse

This is an illustration of the kind of behaviour that teaches children that they are not useful, that they have a fault, that they are hated, that they are disagreeable, that they are not wanted, or that their only significance lies in meeting the requirements of another person. Verbal and emotional abuse are both included in the category of psychological abuse. Some examples of verbal and emotional abuse are: isolating, dismissing, ignoring, using foul language, spreading pieces of gossip, creating falsehoods, slandering, mocking, embarrassing, and bullying. Psychological abuse also involves psychological punishment (Maikaba & Msughter, 2019). This can include guardians or caretakers who chastise a child in an extreme or unusual way, who do something odd to the child, or who threaten or compromise the child in some way. According to Okeafor et al. (2016), the term "psychological abuse" can alternatively be referred to as "emotional mistreatment," "verbal abuse," or "mental abuse."

3.4 Effects of Child Abuse on Victims

Ashimi et al. (2015) observes that child abuse has a negative impact on the victims' ability to receive an education, maintain their long-term physical and psychological welfare, and perform well at work. It also increases the risk of adult antagonism, brutality, and criminal behaviour. Children who are neglected or abused experience the most of their pain on the inside of their bodies. A significant number of youngsters experience poor self-confidence and feelings of blame, typically believing that they are to responsible for the abuse. Children may have the misconception that it is difficult to develop connections built on trust while also enduring feelings of isolation and being bullied. Children frequently experience feelings of hopelessness, contempt, desolation, grief, and wrath in their minds. If a child is having discussions about feeling self-destructive or self-hurtful, the child may have direct physical results, such as wounding cuts, shattered bones, medical difficulties, starvation, or even death. In certain situations, having dialogues about these feelings may cause children to experience direct physical impacts.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), the stress that is associated with a disruption in early brain development has its roots in abusive treatment of children. Extreme anxiety can interfere with the development of both the neurological system and the immune system. As a result, abused children have a significantly increased risk of developing behavioural, physical, and mental health problems as adults, such as being responsible for or a victim of violence, melancholy, smoking, plumpness, high-risk sexual practises, unplanned pregnancy, and substance abuse (Oreoluwa et al., 2024).

Those who survive traumatic experiences as children frequently suffer from PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder). Abuse of children can have a negative impact on a child's mental, emotional, behavioural, and social development at any stage of childhood. Not every child who experiences identical acts of abuse and neglect is affected in the same way. According to Gabriel-Job et al.'s research from 2019, the consequences of child abuse and neglect can be lifelong and debilitating for certain children and young people, while the effects are less severe for others. The age of the child when the abuse happened is a factor that must be considered in some cases. According to Hassan et al. (2016), the abuse has a greater impact on the child when the child is younger. In the worst cases, the child may experience feelings of self-blame, humiliation, or stigmatisation as a result of the abuse.

Hughes (2009) notes that it is a well-known reality that child workers live with terrible people and are adversely pressured by peers to participate in deficient behaviour. Hughes also argues that this is a recognised fact. According to research done by Hassan et al. (2015), children who have been mistreated tend to have the lowest levels of educational development compared to children in other groups. When a child is subjected to abuse, they are at an increased risk of developing emergent stress-associated immunological illnesses such as allergic responses, asthma, and autoimmune ailments. Furthermore, they are at an increased risk of developing hypertension, metabolic and vascular diseases, diabetes, and heart diseases (Vitalis et al., 2025).

3.5 Economic and Social Impact of Child Abuse

If a parent makes the decision not to educate their child(ren), such child(ren) may end up missing out on a benefit to society that does not accrue to the parent who makes the decision. These things, in turn, have an effect on society since there won't be enough competent people of society to make decisions that are acceptable for society (Itiafa & Msughter, 2022). It is impossible to overstate the significance of receiving an education via school since it is through this setting that a child is able to become aware of his or her talents and skills, which, when developed further under the direction of a teacher, will allow the child to mature into his or her full potential. Without a proper education, it is hard to make progress in our contemporary society. The continuous existence and growth of any civilization are dependent on the child's potential to operate successfully in society on several fronts, including socially, politically, economically, and spiritually as people.

Abuse that incorporates child work, such as child street dealing, has actual negative impacts on the availability, installation of unlawful buildings, reliable trash generation, gridlock, automobile collision, and the distortion of urban aesthetics. This type of abuse may be seen as a form of economic exploitation. According to Kellogg et al. (2020), children who are active in child street dealing frequently engage in conflict with the authorities on a variety of different grounds. Some of the factors that contribute to the high number of children in conflict with the law include destitution, social imbalance, poor educational system, family troubles, group pressure, communal and religious confrontations when children are used as the foot soldiers, and group pressure. The most recent report to the African Union on the rights and welfare of the Nigerian child showed that about 6,000 children are being held in prisons and detention centres across the country. These juvenile criminals are frequently treated as adults and are housed in the same facilities as adults. It is traumatic for the individual who is at danger to have many charges brought against them and to be imprisoned without first communicating with a social worker or having the opportunity to be heard. Nobody who is going through difficult times like this would be a patriotic citizen in the nation because they would have the impression that the country has nothing positive to offer them, therefore they would rather hustle for themselves.

Youngsters who are subjected to abuse and neglect are at an increased risk of inflicting pain on others and developing coercive and cruel behaviours when they reach adolescence. This is true despite the fact that the youngsters will have themselves experienced anguish and suffering. Abuse of children can also have negative effects on their sexuality and their health. Children who were forced to fend for themselves and their families and who were subjected to sexual abuse as a result suffer from a variety of issues, including low self-esteem, sadness, hostility, and an inability to trust other people. Abortions, problems during childbirth, children born too young, and even the abandoning of children are all potential outcomes of this behaviour, in addition to the risk of contracting sexually transmitted illnesses. In addition to this, it causes a rise in the overall rate of crime throughout the nation, including offences such as stealing, drug trafficking, and pickpocketing (Aondover et al., 2024).

3.6 Child Abuse and the Media

The war that man wages for his own autonomy and progress is unquestionably won or lost with the persuasive power of the media. This problem of distorted news reporting may be slightly clarified by the readers' lack of passion for the less intriguing topics, via the gap linking to the public's insight and that of professionals about abuse (Nwafor et al., 2024). As a result, the reporting in the media is primarily focused on public situations that are becoming increasingly absurd since these conditions might lead to judicial proceedings. However, there are a few news organisations that have made reporting on the abuse of children a major part of their jobs. Since child abuse and neglect have become recognised social difficulties, the outcomes of which are increasingly being reported and studied, stories regarding child abuse are standing out as really noteworthy in newspapers. This is because the results of child abuse and neglect have become known social concerns. Kayode and Adeniran (2016) made the observation that child labour garnered a significant amount of attention in relation to the vital role that the Media plays in increasing society's awareness of child employment and its response to it.

Individuals are given the ability to learn about issues and make their opinions known thanks to the proliferation of mass media, which may have a tremendous influence, either for the better or for the worse (Vitalis et al., 2024). However, it appeared as though children had neither a presence nor a voice in the news emanating from Nigeria. According to Nnaemeka (2016), the print media has the potential to contribute to the progression of society by disseminating the truth and other useful information, linking the many components of society, and educating individuals on the criteria for planned growth and social change. Persuasion, inspiration, the provision of learning resources, and the provision of relevant development information for educated individuals are other essential aspects of the role that print media plays in the method of development. According to Emmanuel (2019), it is vital to keep in mind that the media only covers a small portion of the incidents involving child abuse and neglect. This is something that should be taken into consideration. The stories that are presented are typically stunning and may entail tragic outcomes such as wounds or even death. When it comes to reporting on child abuse, the mainstream media tends to focus on incidents that are particularly rare, peculiar, or horrifying.

There are a number of different ways in which the media might play a role in helping to reduce the prevalence of child abuse. Nworgu in Onyejelem and Nwokeocha (2024) found that if the following measures were put into place, there would be a significant reduction in the different types of child abuse: a heightened awareness among the abused children of the dangers associated with child exploitation; this could be accomplished through the use of advertisements, public announcements, or rallies; a review of the educational level of parents and guardians, as well as their occupations and the size of their families; enlightenment programmes on the risks

of children working as street vendors; active and genuine responsibility on the part of the government; mass, free, and mandatory education; and a genuine effort to combat neediness through poverty alleviation.

It is imperative that news organisations cover issues related to the protection of children's rights in order to fulfil their responsibility. The media, which is the fourth estate of the realm, functions as both the watchdog of the government and of the people. By performing this function, the media will assist control the excesses and contribute to the preservation of a child's rights. When children are involved in news stories, it is also the responsibility of the media to provide accurate and responsible coverage of such stories (Aondover et al., 2024). According to Olaitan et al. (2016), vulnerable children should not be reported in order to hinder their rights; rather, they should be reported as persons who have the right to survive and be protected.

When it comes to reporting on these news items, the perspective of the organisation is necessary, but the perspectives and opinions of vulnerable children are even more crucial. The safety and well-being of children is a fundamental human right. Reporters and members of the media are required to obtain the authority and consent of the children's parents or guardians before include them in contentious articles. According to Ojiakor and Etodike (2018), negative content of a sexual or violent nature should not be shown to children in the media unless parents have given their consent beforehand. In addition, such programmes should explicitly identify their content and include age-appropriate warnings (Aondover et al., 2022).

There are several responsibilities that fall on the media when it comes to alerting the public about child abuse. These responsibilities include overtly raising people's knowledge of the problem and implicitly influencing public policy (Onyejelem et al., 2023). There are particular channels via which the media can report instances of child abuse. For instance, it is expected of reporters to use exact terminology while reporting any incident of sexual abuse committed against a kid. It is expected of them that they would know the appropriate language to use in the various scenarios involving sexual abuse. It is recommended that authors "call a rape a rape," and that journalists use precise terminology in cases involving various forms of mistreatment in order to "make clear the spectrum of improper conduct."

IV. Conclusion

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perception and influencing policy responses to child abuse in Nigeria. While it has succeeded in bringing cases of abuse to light and generating public discourse, its impact remains limited by challenges such as sensationalism, inconsistent reporting, cultural biases, and a lack of sustained investigative journalism. Effective media representation should move beyond mere reportage to drive systemic change, ensuring that child abuse is not only exposed but also addressed through policy reform and institutional action.

To achieve this, journalists must adopt ethical and child-sensitive reporting practices, prioritizing accuracy, context, and victim protection. Media organizations should also collaborate with government agencies, NGOs, and policymakers to push for stronger child protection laws and their enforcement. Additionally, training programs should be implemented to equip journalists with the skills necessary to report on child abuse responsibly and effectively.

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