

## REMEDY TO CHILD ABUSE-NIGERIAN CONTEXT

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### **Abstract**

*One of the biggest human right abuses rocking the well-being and posterity of our society is child abuse. This practice which is any act or series of act either by parents, care-givers, or strangers often results in harm on the victim. Painfully, since children are in most cases vulnerable and incapable of defending themselves, they become easy targets of victimization. In Nigeria, this social ill unarguably has been on geometric rise with no seemingly remedy at sight. As research has shown, this problem is operational through physical forms which include, beating, lacerations, sexual violations like rape, pornography, female genital mutilation, child labour, street begging, child trafficking, child marriage, forced prostitution, neglect, emotional trauma, kidnapping, and so on. Child abuse over the years has confined most of its victims within the prison of fear, loss of self worth, hatred, bitterness, violence, sexual promiscuity, and different cognitive complications. Some others later resort to lifestyles of antagonism, gangsterism, and hostility, thus turning themselves into social miscreants. Succinctly put, child abuse dwarfs its victim's potentials and nibble off their opportunities, potencies and efficiencies. The thrust of this research is to take a look on issues related to child abuse among Nnewi Christians of Anambra state. This it did by examining the concepts and various issues relating to child abuse which exists in Nnewi. Exploration on why this problem seemed to have been perpetuated was also made. The apparent lacuna vis-à-vis the roles of the government, parents and guardians in stemming this social insanity and aberration was ex-rayed. This study adopts primary and secondary methods in data collection which were socially analyzed. The study concludes that child abuse in Nnewi can only be resolved through a synergic efforts of the government, parents and guardians, religious bodies, and other relevant agencies.*

## **Introduction**

Over the years, child abuse which is the physical and non-physical maltreatment of a child or children has remained a virus that is viciously attacking the existential concerns and dignity of this category of human persons to the very marrow. In Nigeria, this unfortunate development is apparently increasing with alarming crescendo. Practices like abortion, child labour, child trafficking, sexual abuse and exploitations, early/forced marriage, beatings, lacerations, neglect, and so on, are clear indices of a society whose conscience is distorted and warped by prejudice and utter disdain for the rights of this category of people. Sadly, the inability of the victims of these inhuman treatments to defend themselves apparently as a result of age and lack of enough moral and physical stamina, appear to be a soft spot of continuous attack and ill treatment by the assailants. In 2016 at Otolo Nnewi, Anambra state, the case of a woman who placed hot iron on the buttocks of her ten year old maid for failing to do her house chores went viral in the entire town. In addition was a 14 year old girl of one mission school in Nnewi town who refused to go on a mid-term break as a result of nursing the fear that her own biological father who hitherto disvirgined her, would continue from where he stopped. This was in 2017 when the researcher was serving in that school as the chaplain.

Meanwhile, as research has revealed, the moral level of any institution is measured against the standard of respect for human life and dignity it promotes. This was the position taken by Centesimuss (1991) when he asserts that human persons are willed by God and are imprinted with God's image. He went further to argue that human dignity came from God because we are made in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1: 26-27). Human life is sacred because the human person is the most central and clearest reflection of God among us. Humans have transcendent worth and value that came from God. The dignity is based on any human quality, legal mandate, individual merit, or accomplishment. Human dignity is inalienable, intrinsic and essential part of his person. Human beings are qualitatively different from any other living being in the world because they are capable of knowing and loving God, unlike other creatures. Keane (2008) succinctly puts this view thus: "Belief in the dignity of the human person is the foundation of morality" (p.80). Without doubt, the dignity of the human person in a community is the criterion against which all aspects of sociological life must be measured. All human beings are therefore ends to be

served by the institutions that make up the society, not means to be exploited for personal goals. Human person right from conception must be respected with a reverence that is religious, being aware that we are created in the image of God (Gen 1: 26-27). The Encyclical letter of Pope John Paul 11 leads credence to this when it states:

Man is called to a fullness of life which far exceeds the dimension of his earthly existence, because it consists in sharing the very life of God. The loftiness of this supernatural vocation reveals the greatness and the inestimable value of human life even in its temporal phase. (p. 4).

From both divine revelation and natural law, we know that there is something special about human life. May (1999) throws more light on this when he said:

Human life is surpassingly good because the life which God gives man is quite different from the life of all other creatures in as much as man, although formed from the dust of the earth is a manifestation of God in the world, a sign of his presence, a trace of his glory. (p. 22).

Protection of human life and dignity is thus a natural instinct of all people and also stands at the core of the catholic social teaching. Besides Gen 1:26-27 which is an essential biblical source of advocacy for respect for human life, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) in drawing on the Genesis account, further refined the understanding of the human person created in God's image by interpreting Genesis to teach that the human person is an intelligent being endowed with free will and self-movement. The human person has a soul which endows him or her with the ability to know and love God freely, thereby having a privileged place in the order of creation. The era of enlightenment placed another emphasis on reason and the rational nature of the human person. According to Mark (1996), "New and revolutionary ideals abound, particularly surrounding rights and freedom." (p. 36).

Sociologically, the implications of child abuse also calls for concern. Research shows that child abuse inhibits the appropriate development of certain regions of the child's brain. A child that is passing through harsh experiences or abuse may lack cognitive development and emotional control. This is made manifest by having

children who are paranoids, depressed, emotionally and physically traumatized and anti-social. It is against this backdrop that this article intends to bring to the limelight issues relating to child abuse which apparently is a slap on the face of human dignity, with the intention of proffering solutions to such degrading and dehumanizing practice.

**Remedy to Child Abuse:** In view of the devastating nature of child abuse, it becomes necessary to advocate the following as solutions aimed at eradicating this social malady.

**Poverty Alleviation:** Poverty alleviation is suggested as one of the ways to address child abuse in Nigeria. Going by functional theory in order to proffer solution to any social problem, one must get at the root cause of the problem. Poverty is a menace with a parallel effect on children, thus the imperative of its being eradicated. This could be achieved, according to Ogwumike (2001), by the Federal Government making efforts to facilitate poverty reduction in urban and rural areas by providing basic input to enhance people's livelihood and income.

Tackling the challenges of poverty is discussed as poverty alleviation or reduction. This indicates the economic crises which Nigeria had in the last years made a futile search for solution from one economic policy to another. Policies which have continued to impoverish rather than empower the lots of the people economically had been put in place. Besides the current presidential system of governance which not only promotes mal-administration, corruption, and ineptitude, it equally grossly undermines the nation, economically. From the foregoing, it is evident that Nigeria is operating a vicious cycle of economic system that needs new approach if it must break out from her present economic deadlock. For instance, programs such as National Economic and Empowerment Development Strategy (NEEDS), Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAP), Back to the Land (BL) were all programmes meant to boost the economy of the nation.

To Ogwumike (2001), the poverty alleviation programmes or measures implemented so far have focused more on growth, basic and rural development approaches examined under the pre-Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) era, and the democratic era.

**Public Awareness:** Public awareness is suggested as a way to eradicate child abuse in Nigeria. Public awareness is similar or close to public enlightenment. Agricultural imputes, credit facilities, training programmes to develop skills, and

adequate wage and salary are suggested ways of creating awareness on poverty alleviation in Nigeria. There is a compelling need for public enlightenment programmes aimed at correcting the misconceptions related to child abuse. Government, private and non-governmental organizations should campaign against harmful cultural practices that are perpetrated against children, particularly female genital mutilation and child marriage. The suggested public enlightenment can be done through workshops, seminars, and training programmes.

The media can advocate for a particular policy that will benefit children and encourage a change of attitude among members of the community through advertisements, dramas, special programmes and documentations. Shannon, Allison and Winsler (2006) opine that information about the Child Rights Act and its salient provisions should also be made available to the public domain.

**Dialogue:** Dialogue deals with a discussion between two or more people in which opinions and personal experiences are exchanged. A lot can be achieved through dialogue in solving the problem of child abuse in Nigeria. Dialogue allows people to pour out their mind and great attention given to their opinions. Njoku (2009) maintained that people with different opinions can never have proper knowledge of themselves without effective and unbiased dialogue. According to him, "It is a process of self-donation." (p. 242). Since one of the major causes of conflict is gap in communication or sharing of meaning, that gap should be closed by cross-pollination of ideas vis-à-vis issues related to child abuse in Nigeria. Child abuse should not be tolerated nor encouraged through this mode, rather should be corrected with the word of God as inspired, or by sound moral reasoning. The purpose of dialogue, types and impediments to dialogue should not be ignored.

**Tripartite Dialogue:** Tripartite dialogue is suggested and this is based on the fact that mutual intolerance does not serve any useful purpose in our country. Participants in the tripartite dialogue should avoid confusion, selfish defence, and reckless propaganda that can give room for the perpetuation of this monster called child abuse. Tripartite dialogue will give an in-depth knowledge of this subject matter. It will hopefully liberate the people from the closed or cloistered system they believe in and cleave to by accident of birth and faith, and elevate them to spiritual freedom, offering them a broad vision of what a fulfilled life is all about.

Tripartite dialogue is suggested as a positive way to break the tide of child abuse with leaders of different faiths in Nigeria viz: Christianity, Islam, and Traditional Religion, leading to making commitment that will repudiate arrogance, aggression, segregation, stigmatization, neglect, trauma and other negative attitudes, which obscure the word of God. People of a particular faith should be bold to interact with people of other faiths about how child abuse affects them. It is noted that the spirit of this tripartite dialogue will touch people so deeply that they will begin to appreciate the indignities of child abuse in Nigeria.

Under the atmosphere of mutual love, the participants in this dialogue will tend to listen, take bold decisions, and dispel misunderstandings, which had made mutual and peaceful co-existence, social integration, and interaction difficult or impossible. This will essentially build our nation as a new community of love and tolerance where meaningful and sustainable development under mutual trust in abolishing child abuse will be achieved. This will restore the dignity of children, help them tap enough resources and establish the necessary conditions for collaboration towards fixed practical objective, despite doctrinal differences.

**Religious Mobilization:** The role of Christians in eradicating child abuse should be based on religious mobilization. The Christian church should demonstrate in practical terms the old premise that to whom much is given, much is expected. It should be active in religious mobilization. The church is expected to appeal to and change the insensitive attitude and behavior of Nigerian Christians. Religious mobilization based on the Christian doctrine is recommended because religion, according to Nag (1967) "is the most pervading force." (p. 80). According to Mala (1985), it is "a mass of institution with very large followers especially during Sunday worship and festive days." (p. 60). Religious mobilization has immense influence on man's relationship with the supernatural. Incompatible religious beliefs nourish socio-economic stagnation. Other mobilization agencies such as the family, educational and legal institutions, labour unions, social and philanthropic clubs should wear Christian toga in their functions, and exercise meaningful moral duties in their work ethics. According to Dzugba (1991), "these organs are religious bodies" (p. 67). The social and Christian groups in Nigeria that needed to be mobilized cut across religions. Similarly, religious adherents control the vast human and material resources in our immediate environs. Cutting across class, occupation, and education, they have their primary and intimate loyalty more to religious groups than they do to government. Religious mobilization could be done through mental orientation, reordering of moral behavior, and redress,

dismantling of the structures through which Nigerian society has profited through the exploitation of children.

**Religious Education:** Religious re-education entails a clear cut policy such as effective use of consistent public religious enlightenment programme. Rationality should reflect in Christian beliefs, practices and social life. Contemporary religious re-education should be tailored towards eradicating teachings which promote child abuse in the society. Religious re-education seems the best approach to the eradication of child abuse because education and knowledge will lead to the realization of the truth, which will emancipate people from the slavery of ignorance. Against this backdrop, this article suggests that re-education remains an element of religious mobilization. The Christian church is implored to take the lead especially because it has large followership, ecclesiastical activities and authority. Christians occupy the seat of government and control the social structures and institutions of many communities in our land. They possess charismatic leaders and followers who influence people through their words and lifestyles.

Religious re-education entails drawing programmes aimed at making the moral contents more positive in re-engineering the mindset of people with respect to proper care of children. It is to address such bottlenecks as distrust, disharmony and biased feelings associated with child abuse, that Christians should see as the expectations placed on them, and probably part of the reasons they occupy prominent positions in many Nigerian communities.

Parents are implored to join hands to put an end to evil indoctrination of their children and wards. Religious leaders should appreciate and reiterate the need for the immediacy of parent's involvement in eradicating this. The intensity of emotions parents generate and the demand they make upon loyalties can be exploited. Religious leaders and parents are therefore expected to inspire a new spirit of compassionate and altruistic love for mankind. Hence, religious re-education will enlighten those who selfishly maintain indignities to which children are subjected. It hopes to make them care and have a positive plan for a genuine translation of religious message, irrespective of denomination, birth, status, education and world view, and to jointly use all human and spiritual resources in putting an end to child abuse.

**Good Governance:** Good governance is considered as a veritable remedy to Child abuse in Nigeria. Corruption has been discovered to be a virus that attacks the very layers of sound moral conviction and judgment. This is why when the motive of leaders in the country is to loot or misappropriate public funds, the citizens suffer, as their needs will not be met, and this includes children who may, as a result, be lured into different degrading treatments just to eke out their existence. In view of this social anomaly, the government is left with no other option than to ensure that basic necessities such as water, education, food, security, health-care facilities, and sanitation are provided.

Ibe Nwabueze (personal communication, 2-9-19) said that government should also improve monitoring and evaluation, communal participation, proper planning, budgeting, implementation, and accountability. Good governance policies should also be extended to rural communities through local governments in which they can provide basic amenities like schools, clean water and health facilities.

**Role of Parents:** The role of parents is imperative in putting an end to child abuse and neglect in Nigeria. It is the responsibility of parents to care, nurture and train children to become responsible members of the society. Similarly, it is strongly believed that in a child's life, parent's role is important in determining whether or not a child will be abused. Parents are expected to find time to be with their children in order to provide attention, direction and supervision. The training and educating of children should not be left solely with teachers or rely solely on the formal education system. Parents must ensure that their children get the best from life and not become a menace to the society. Children should be taught by parents about the dangers involved in talking to strangers, and the importance of being careful even with those they are familiar with.

As an alternative to selling items on the street, children could display wares for sale in their home, and people who are old enough to take care of themselves could be the ones to sell. Parents should also reasonably discipline their children with methods that are appropriate for the child. Parents according to Chukwu Ike (personal communication, 29-8-19) should observe that money is not everything in life. The practices of husbands and wives going all out to pursue money in the name of business has a retributive effects on the children as future leaders of the family or home. There is time for everything. Children need to have a sound foundation based on the fear of God, discipline and hard work. Parents can enforce these moral values which will impact positively on their children.



**Close Monitoring:** Moral decadence is a learned act that a victim has to fight for a long period of time if a lasting change is desired. Bearing this in mind, a victim of moral decay should be thoroughly followed up even after being certified sane. Close monitoring of a clergy, for instance, over that child who is assumed to have changed is extremely important because more often than not, they go back to the act when free-lanced.

There are many cases of some children who were simply sent on expulsion from school as punishment for involving themselves in dirty dealings after their first error. The resultant effect is that they come back becoming closet immorals (immorals that operate secretly) owing to the fact that little or no effort was made to counsel them during the period they were on suspension. Thus, whether the victims of immoral acts are counseled or not, they should always be monitored closely in order to forestall future re-occurrence. Generally, parents and guardians should check and monitor their children against friends who are likely to initiate their children or wards into immoral activities.

### **Implementation of laws**

Another way forward in tackling child abuse is implementation of laws. Barrister Samuel Okeke (personal communication, 4/3/2020) states that many laws and policies were put into place with the purpose of protecting children from abuse. However, the laws have not been effective for many reasons including poor enforcement mechanism, lack of rehabilitation of sexual offenders, negative attitudes of parent and inefficient judicial processes.

Onwuso, Ebere (personal communication, 15-08-2019) contends that adequate measures should be provided to enforce laws through appropriate mechanisms. In order to achieve the implementation of laws, the law enforcement officers should be encouraged in this onerous task. Since law enforcement officers such as the Nigerian Police, Road Safety Corps, Nigerian Immigration Services among others, have the greatest role to play, there is a compelling need to increase their remuneration and provide them with incentive to work. Alozie Ezeji (personal communication, 2-9-19) says training on child issues should be implemented to enable a better and improved response to child abuse situation that are reported or encountered. Laws, policies, child rights acts, framework prohibitions, and national plan of actions should be made known and easily accessible to the people.

It should be noted also that sanctions for violations of child protection laws articulated above should be sufficiently severe to serve as a deterrent.

**Pastoral care and counseling:** Church ministers should treat victims of child abuse with love and absolute care. They are not to be excommunicated nor treated with levity, disdain and hate. They should properly be counseled as mortals who are in need of help. Murphy (2003) intimated that many immorals refuse to participate in corrupt movements associated with moral decay in their environments after counselings. He pointed out that some of them were no more interested in parading down the street half-naked and engaging in shameful sexual actions in public, hence they are people who merit love, compassion, and gentle handling. Collins (1988) affirms that when deviants get rejected by the church to which they belong, they go to any length to destroy the image of such a church. Thus, continuous counseling should be employed in the optimistic sense on any known decadent without losing hope.

There is a firm belief that child abuse will be reduced when pastoral care and counseling is followed by a high-powered deliverance team which will consolidate the positive outcome of dialogue. The deliverance team should be made of powerful and charismatic Christian leaders who are deeply rooted in the word of faith. In order to drive child abuse fear from the people, the team should approach them with all spiritual resources at their disposal. Pastoral counseling is recommended because it will enable the pastors, evangelists and other men of God to relate more meaningfully with the victims of child abuse and neglect among the populace, offer positive help that will lift them from the pit of despair to the pinnacle of hope. It will help in liberating, empowering and nurturing wholeness in the lives of child abuse victims.

## **Conclusion**

As research has shown, child abuse, like a deadly virus, has been viciously attacking the moral, economic, and social layers of the society to the very marrow. As statistics have shown, majority of the social miscreants and deviants were victims of different types of child abuse. These are clear indices of the ravaging effects of this monster. There is therefore an expediency of synergy of operation by the NGO's saddled with the task of defending the rights of children, parents, care-givers, and religious bodies in fighting this menace, and thus restore hope and self worth to the victims, and sanity to the society.

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