The Role of Social Work and Care Practice in Protecting Vulnerable Children

Otonjo Ibim Emoyon-Iredia, Ph.D
majestykidz16@gmail.com
Department of Educational Psychology, Guidance and Counselling
Faculty of Education
Ignatius Ajuru University of Education, Port Harcourt

Abstract
Children are susceptible to numerous types of abuse. Abuse can be physical, physiological, or psychological. Girls, especially those who have been fostered out, are becoming increasingly vulnerable to sexual assault. Domestic employees, especially females, work long hours and are denied education and freedom of speech. They are also at risk of physical and sexual abuse. Social work has the potential to significantly alleviate the obstacles encountered by children in Rivers State by raising awareness and motivating legislation to address societal circumstances that create vulnerability. This is the focus of this paper. It highlights the roles of social work and care practice in protecting these vulnerable children. The ecological theory provides one overall framework for understanding child care. It aids social workers in understanding how people interact with their surroundings in the context of larger socio-political order. Specific interventions for social workers to consider including child protection, special needs children with disabilities, crèche/day care services and child/maternal health care services in Nigeria are discussed. The article recommends, among others, that there should be proper development and implementation of policies and programmes to safeguard child rights.
Keywords: social, care, practice, vulnerable, children

Introduction
Social work and care practices refer to a set of professional activities that are aimed at improving the wellbeing and quality of life of individuals, families, and communities. These practices involve a range of activities that are designed to support people in need. Social work and care practices are often implemented in a range of settings, including hospitals, schools, social service agencies, and community centres. These practices are essential in supporting individuals and families who are facing a range of challenges, including poverty, homelessness, mental health issues, and addiction.

By providing assessment, counselling, advocacy, case management, and education, social workers and caregivers can make a significant positive impact on the lives of their clients. Social workers and caregivers can work to place children in safe and loving homes through adoption, foster care, or other placement options. They can also provide ongoing support to families to ensure that children are well cared for in their homes. It is vital to mention that in Nigeria, social work with women and children is both an intriguing and hard field of practice. It is interesting because it gives social workers access to an evidence-based practice forum where they can communicate with professionals from other agencies who work with women

and children. This is in addition to the joy it provides practitioners when they attempt to liberate and empower these disadvantaged groups in the society.

Unfortunately, improving society is an ongoing job, so social workers can expect workloads to be at a high. One unmissable challenge of a social work job is interacting with vulnerable people daily. Jones et al. (2012) averred that to be successful in social work, there is need to be patient, and empathetic and have strong communication and interpersonal skills. Also, it is essential to be persistent and resilient in dealing with difficult circumstances, including helping people make changes and adopt new behaviours. Not only that, there is also need to build relationships with the families of these children and adults so that they can also help to identify and resolve problems the persons may be experiencing in their day-to-day lives.

As humanitarian service providers, social workers provide a tremendous amount of energy to any society. Their activities in Rivers State are diverse and extensive. They function at both the individual and group levels. Individually, it is typical to see a social worker supporting commuters by acting as traffic wardens, particularly at odd hours when traffic wardens are off duty. It is also usual to see them at peak hours, supporting traffic wardens in regulating the highways for smooth traffic flow. Rivers State social workers are also visible during fires, assisting in the extinguishment of the flames, especially when fire department personnel are absent. Their presence is also palpable during rescue operations for victims of car accidents, airline crashes, and trapped victims of collapsed buildings.

Group social workers in Rivers State can be found under the umbrella of numerous Non-Governmental and Philanthropic organizations, as well as associations of various professional bodies. The Red Cross Society, Rotary Club, Nigerian Medical Association (NMA), Nigerian Society of Engineers (NSE), International Federation of Women Lawyers, Nigerian Union of Journalists (NUJ), National Association of Women Journalists (NAWOJ), Academic Staff Union of Universities (ASUU), Jaycees, Sam SamJaja Foundation, and others are notable among them.

The main distinguishing feature of this group of social workers in Nigeria is that they perform their services on humanitarian grounds without being employed by the users of their services or being compensated for such activities. They volunteer their services to the community. These characteristics are consistent with the definition provided by the New Webster Dictionary (2014), which defines a social worker as "a person who does social work, i.e. providing professional service or material assistance or any organized activity concerned with the treatment of social problems, particularly among the underprivileged." As previously indicated, the humanitarian services provided by social workers in Rivers State are numerous and extensive. There are social workers that focus their services on orphanages throughout the state, old people's homes, mental health facilities, hospitals, and police stations. Besides these groups of social workers, there are social workers officially employed to oversee the welfare of Child and Family. This class of social workers forms the subject of this research work and so this article shall x-ray the impact of social work and care practice on children across the state.

Theoretical Framework

The ecological theory pioneered by Germain and Gitterman (1980) refers to practice that recognises interactions between living organisms and their environments; stating that "…human beings change their physical and social environments and are changed by them through processes of continual reciprocal adaptation". The ecological systems model is used in social work practice to integrate the different theoretical practice models and interventions. It aids social workers in understanding how people interact with their surroundings in the context of larger sociopolitical orders. According to the ecological model, individuals are constantly transacting with other people or systems in their environment, and these varied people and systems influence one another (Amilin, 2017). As a result, adequate assessments of human problems and intervention plans must incorporate the mutual impact of people and environmental systems. It instructs social professionals to comprehend how individuals interact with and relate to their surroundings (Ebbers & Wijnberg, 2017).

A child who is deemed to be in need of care under the Children's Act 38/2005 and placed in an alternative care setting is removed from his or her natural habitat, according to ecological theory. The child may be placed in foster care or a Children's Home, and it is believed that he or she would adjust to this shift in environment in order to cope successfully and work in sync with this new system. When this does not occur, imbalance and tension occur. Ecological theory provides one overall framework for understanding child care in connection to many elements that have direct and indirect effects on the child and his/her care (De Vos et al., 2018). Because of a historical imbalance in resources and service provision across racial lines, each of the systemic levels may fall short of having the greatest possible impact on the child's future development.

Challenges children face in Nigeria

Children are God's precious gifts for the advancement of the human race; they are very tender, fragile, and gentle, so they require protection and tender loving care from parents. The welfare of every community, its growth, and development are dependent on the health, strength, and wellbeing of the child (Alolagbe, 2008). Child labour, on the other hand, is a social phenomena that is prevalent in developing nations such as Nigeria, where 15 million children under the age of 14 work as child labourers in both rural and urban areas (UNICEF, 2008). According to available data, 53 percent of children eligible for primary education are subjected to child labour in Nigeria, while an estimated 81.12 percent of children qualified for secondary school are not attending or appear to be combining work and schooling due to child labour activities (Okafor, 2010).

As a result, a considerable proportion of youngsters of primary and secondary school age appear to be working as child labourers throughout the country. Some children who work as child labourers work in paid occupations in farms, while others work as home assistants or domestic servants (Nwokoro, 2011). This tendency endangers the educational, emotional, and physical well-being of the children who are afflicted. Most of the children afflicted appear to perform poorly academically, while some may quit schooling (UNICEF, 2008). Aside from that, some child labourers are subjected to lengthy hours of work in hazardous and difficult physical conditions, rendering them prone to health risks (Amao et al., 2014).

Some concerns have a negative impact on children in Nigeria, necessitating the participation of social workers. Although the federal government has passed the Child Rights Act, many states have yet to implement it (Okoye, 2011). Children, in particular, are subjected to various sorts of abuse. Abuse can be physical, physiological, or psychological, and it can be the result of financial difficulty and/or the dissolution of the traditional family unit. Some cultural beliefs allow for the maltreatment of children, particularly those with disabilities. Girls and those who have been fostered out, are becoming increasingly vulnerable to sexual abuse. Domestic servants, primarily females, work long hours and are frequently denied education and freedom of expression. They are also at risk of physical and sexual abuse (Imprint, 2007).

Types of child abuse
The following are the various types of child abuse, according to Tracie et al. (2014):

a) Physical abuse: This is the actual or potential physical injury caused by a person in a position of responsibility's action or lack of action that is reasonably within his or her control. Hitting, spanking, tossing, poisoning, burning, scorching, drowning, or   smothering are all examples of physical abuse. It can also refer to intentionally causing bodily harm to a child by inventing the symptom or causing poor health and injury to a child. The occurrence could be one-time or recurrent.

b) Sexual abuse: This can happen between a child and another. It can also happen between a child and an adult who are in a responsible relationship due to age or development. The activity may be intended to fulfil or meet the other person's wants. Child sexual abuse is defined as pushing or encouraging children to engage in sexual acts, whether the child is aware of what is going on or not. Physical contact and penetrative or non-penetrative acts may be involved in the activities. This may also include allowing children to take part in the viewing or creation of pornographic materials, as well as encouraging youngsters to act in sexually inappropriate ways.

c) Neglect and negligent treatment: This is the caregiver's failure to provide for the child's development in health, education, emotional development, nourishment, shelter, and safe living conditions. Appraisals of neglect consider the resources available to reasonably provide for the child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral, or social development. This involves failing to effectively supervise and safeguard children from harm, as well as a general lack of resources.

d) Emotional abuse: This is a child's persistent emotional abuse that has a negative impact on his or her perspective and development. It may also include telling the child that he or she is useless, or that the child's main purpose in life is to suit the demands of others, or even setting improper expectations on the youngster. This is especially true for disabled children. Telling a child, either directly or indirectly, that he or she is unloved and inadequate is an example of emotional abuse. Threatening, scaring, discriminating, scapegoating, corrupting, ridiculing, degrading, bullying, humiliating (like asking potentially embarrassing questions, demanding potentially embarrassing actions), or other physical forms of hostile or rejecting treatments are all examples of emotional abuse.

Areas of social work practice with children in Nigeria
Children, like women, are categorized as vulnerable groups and are easily vulnerable victims of abuse and suffering due to their fragile nature in all ramifications. As a result, social workers

are interested in them in order to protect children while also promoting healthy growth and development for them. Specific interventions for social workers to consider when working with children are listed below.

   i)   Child protection

Child protection is an essential area of social work practice in Nigeria since it deals with the different methods of keeping all children safe and protecting them from any sort of abuse, neglect, violence, or harm. Furthermore, child protection comprises preventing harm to children's bodies and development, as well as ensuring they grow up in settings commensurate with the provision of safe and effective care. The ultimate goal is for children to have the best possible life prospects and to effectively transit into adulthood (Jones et al., 2012).

Because of cultural norms, religious beliefs, and poverty, many children in Nigeria are extremely vulnerable to abuse and neglect. For example, in the south-south zone, child witchcraft has resulted in serious child abuse (Sencke, 2012). In the same region, with a focus on Edo, Delta, and Cross River, one in every three families is reported to have been victims of child trafficking (Nwokeoma, 2014). Girls are primarily trafficked into domestic service, street trading, and commercial sexual exploitation; while boys are typically forced into street vending, agriculture, mining, minor criminality, and the drug trade. Child domestic violence is frequently viewed as part of the socialization process in the south-east, south-south, and south-west (Nwokeoma, 2014; Oludayo, 2014; Tade & Aderinto, 2012). Young girls are denied access to education and have poor reproductive health in the north, where early marriage and the Almajiri system are still prevalent. Almajiris (Koranic schools) boys are frequently driven into child labour (particularly begging), abuse, and even trafficking (Jones et al., 2012). Without a doubt, these behaviours rob children of life-changing possibilities and expose them to a variety of social and economic risks.

   ii)   Special needs children/children with disabilities

Negative attitudes against disabilities are well ingrained in Nigerian culture. Families with special needs children suffer stigmatizing attitudes from individuals of their community. Stigma is felt by family members who are socially rejected and devalued (Zartaloudi & Madianus, 2015). Frequently, the illness is linked to ancestral ills. Disability-related social stigma leads to marginalization and isolation. Other family members are likewise isolated as a result. Children with impairments are particularly vulnerable in this environment. As long as there remains a negative public attitude towards disability, which influences how the disabled and their families are perceived, social work practitioners must intervene.

Disabilities, whether physical or mental, incur a significant social stigma, exposing these youngsters to various forms of violence and abuse. Parenting a disabled child may be extremely difficult and painful. Relationships and family functioning are likely to suffer as a result of the stress. However, denial, blame projection, guilt, grief, retreat, rejection, and acceptance are common parental emotions to their disabled children (Keller & Honig, 2014). Such children are sometimes neglected by their parents for the remainder of their life. The lack of institutions in Nigeria to adequately care for these youngsters exacerbates their precarious situation. Where these facilities are accessible, the expense of maintaining children in them is typically very costly, and many of these children's parents lack the financial means to place their children there. Most families end up keeping them within the family context, frequently without proper care, exposing them to all types of maltreatment. In this way, the social worker serves a dual

purpose. For those in institutional care, s/he serves as a liaison between the institution and the parents, providing information on the child's progress and promoting good relationships and communication between the parents and the institution. While those living at home coach parents/guardians/family members on the need for being supportive to the children and patiently listening to their anxieties and challenges. S/he connects them with other families with special needs children through group work for interaction on healthy coping methods. The social worker also collaborates with other agencies on policy development and implementation for the needs of disabled children.

iii) Crèche/Day care services in Nigeria

Chukwu and Nnama-Okechukwu (2019) defines crèche as the daytime care of a child under the age of three by someone other than the child's legal guardians or someone outside the child's immediate family. Farrell and Wu (2013) define crèche as the provision of day care, supervision, recreation, and, in some cases, medical services for children of preschool age or the disabled. This service is available near the workplaces of women who have infants or preschool children; for example, tertiary institution campuses, hospitals, markets, or large factories. They also give health treatments, social skills, and educational possibilities to preschool children through exposure to early learning materials.

In the traditional African environment, family members such as grandparents, cousins, sisters, and aunts would care for infants while the mother/parents were away. This childcare assistance is frequently provided in the form of informal fostering of children to relatives in order for youngsters to develop necessary life skills. When extended family members travel to the market or other vital places, they leave their children with neighbours and friends. It is expected that family members will care for and support the child until the mother or parents return. The disintegration of traditional bonds as a result of urbanization has created a void. The concept of keeping children in crèche centres is a recent phenomenon in Africa, yet it is becoming more acceptable as women's responsibilities change (Agbawodikeizu & Agwu, 2016). Working parents typically send their preschool children to crèches. The goal is to allow parents to focus on their work for the day in their various offices, while also allowing the child to socialize with other children at the crèche centre.

The majority of crèche institutions in Nigeria are run by churches or private individuals. Social workers' primary tasks include ensuring that children in crèche centres are secure, that their rights are safeguarded, that their care plans are relevant and unique to the child in question, and that they are assessed on a regular basis. If social workers receive evidence that leads them to believe that a child is at danger of substantial harm at a crèche, they are required by law to investigate the case. Support and caring are important aspects of social work support services. It is about ensuring that children are protected and receive all of the assistance they require to improve their emotional and psychological health. Social workers should be employed in crèche centres to assist in providing support services to working parents who drop off their children and to collaborate with centre instructors in the provision of child care.

iv) Child and maternal health care services in Nigeria

Due to the high frequency of maternal and child mortality in Nigerian rural and urban communities, the health of children and women is a major public health concern (Aliyu et al., 2018). According to studies, Nigeria is a major contributor to the maternal mortality rate in

Sub-Saharan Africa, not only due to its large population but also to its high maternal mortality ratio (Omo-Aghoja et. al., 2010).

According to the WHO/United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF, 2008), Nigeria had the third highest number of maternal deaths in the world in 1995 (about 45,000 deaths) (Ogunjimi et al., 2012). Nigeria was ranked second only to India in terms of maternal mortality (Ndep, 2014). Studies carried out in Rivers State Teaching Hospital by Nwagha et al. (2010) recorded consistent increase in the maternal mortality rate over the 3-year period of 2003(756.8), 2004(897.6) and 2005(1052.2). However, Agan et al. (2010) reported a consistently decreasing MMR over their 5-year study period. With such a high percentage of child and maternal mortality, social workers must collaborate with other health practitioners to lower the high rate of child and maternal mortality.

Legislations, policies and programmes on children in Nigeria
According to Asiwe and Odirin (2014), some Nigerian legislations, policy frameworks and guidelines which exist to protect the child include:
➢ Establishment of science schools for girls
➢ Adoption of the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Law Enforcement and Administration Act (2003)
➢ Establishment of a National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons (NAPTIP) 14th July 2003
➢ National Health Policy of Nigeria (2004, revised in 2017):
➢ Adoption of a national policy on HIV/AIDs, reproductive health and female genital mutilation
➢ Inheritance rights of women especially in Igbo land (Upheld by the supreme court on April 14, 2014)
➢ The Children and Young Persons Act (1963), and
➢ The Child Rights Act 2003

Conclusion
This paper demonstrates the significance of children in the growth of any nation. The wellbeing of children must be prioritized in policies, programmes, and legislation for any nation to prosper. Despite this, children in Nigeria have not been given equal opportunities. The distinctive role of social work, which has not been fully considered, is fuelling the persistence of this disparity. Thus, social workers may strengthen children's capacity through empowerment programmes, the removal of any cultural barriers, and ensuring that children are fully integrated into society. Social work has the potential to significantly alleviate the obstacles encountered by children in Nigeria by raising awareness and motivating legislation to address societal circumstances that create vulnerability based on age.

Recommendations
1. There should be proper development and implementation of policies and programmes to safeguard child rights.
2. The duties of different stakeholders should be clarified in legislation and policies to enable efficient service delivery.

3. There is need for more resources, coordination among stakeholders, and monitoring of programmes and interventions to curb the menace.

4. Policy should be put in place to assist social workers to challenge the structural causes of child abuse and advocate for children enlightenment and agency.

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