

Religious response to violence, abuse and neglect against children in the Nigerian society

By

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Abstract

Violence, Abuse and Neglect (VAN) against children are considered as adverse childhood experiences which can dramatically or dreadfully impact a person's life experience, human disposition and health. Children from different backgrounds both in developed and developing countries of the world have fallen victims of VAN of which Nigeria is not exempted. Millions of children under the age of eighteen and below experience VAN in the family, school, street and online environment. On the other hand, right from creation, religion has an inherent interest in family life, human development and social integration. Many religious people, including teens and children look to their faith community or God for direction and practical relief in the outcome of child mishandling. Against this backdrop, the researcher's past experience and present interest in violence, abuse and neglect against children provoked the intent and content of this scholarly work. The study explores the prevalence of violence, abuse and neglect against children in the Nigerian society by creating awareness of the prevalent nature, its implications and the role of religion in changing the old narratives about VAN. The study employs a qualitative research approach. The findings have implications for propelling further and wider in-depth research, and consequently initiating grounds for a better society and future for our children.

Keywords: Violence, Abuse, Neglect, Child, Religion, Response, Prevalence, Influence, Nigeria

Introduction

“Children have the right to be protected from all forms of violence. They must be kept safe from harm. They must be given proper care by those looking after them.”

Article 19, UN
Convention on the Rights of the Child (1990)

Violence, abuse and neglect (VAN) against children is a global practice, problem and phenomenon. Report of the National Survey (2014) states that every child has the legitimate right to be protected against all kinds and manners of violence; this right is encapsulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). Consequently, nearly 3 in 4 children - or 300 million children - aged 2–4 years regularly suffer physical punishment

and/or psychological violence at the hands of parents and caregivers (WHO, 2022). Invariably, millions of children under the age of eighteen and below experience VAN in the family, school, street and online environment. Millions of cases have been reported of children across the globe, regardless of the economic and social status, culture, religion, ethnicity, race or tongue, who are subjected to violence or maltreatment on a daily basis. An investigative report from studies conducted in the UK revealed that religious groups and organizations play vital roles in the life of millions of children in England and Wales, with about 34,000 registered religious groups (Jay, et al, 2021).

Child maltreatment is a global problem with serious life-threatening consequences (WHO, 2022). Despite the recent national studies in several low- and middle-income countries, data from several nations are still lacking. However, global studies indicate that almost 3 in 4 children aged 2-4 years regularly endure physical punishment and/or psychological violence at the hands of parent and caregivers, and 1 in 5 women and 1 in 13 men reported of having been sexually abused as a child. Every year, there are approximately 40,150 homicide deaths of children under 18 years, of which a quantum is as a result of children maltreatment (National Survey, 2014). This number almost clearly miscalculates the true magnitude of the problem, since a substantial proportion of deaths due to child maltreatment are incorrectly attributed to falls, burns, drowning and other causes. One in 5 women and 1 in 13 men reported of having been sexually abused as a child aged 0-17 years. 120 million girls and young women under 20 years of age have suffered some form of coerced sexual activity.

Historically, it is quite difficult to point out the exact time and age when child abuse and neglect started; hence, long before ages children have been abused and neglected (Achema, et al, 2014). The Bible did tell of

cases of child abuse and neglect, of which one them is the story of the crippled and forgotten man, Mephibosheth, son of Jonathan, grandson to King Saul (2 Samuel 9). We were told of how a caregiver assigned to his care mishandled him, he was afterwards forgotten in history, until the day he was eventually remembered and celebrated by King David. In other words, child abuse and neglect is as old as man and is evident in different parts of the world, cutting across cultures, ethnicities, religions, socio-economic groups, and traditional settings. Ever since the child abuse and neglect issue have attracted series and degrees of debates and discourses on a global stage.

According to Badoe (2017), child abuse research is still in the infancy stage and there is an insufficiency of data from most African countries. In the African cultural setting, children are considered the crowning glory in an African marriage. Family size has so much to speak in the African society. The more children are given birth to during the marriage, the greater the glory. There are certain expectations or responsibilities which the family and communities involved should accomplish, and which form the traditional practices of the people. In African philosophy, one of the core aims of marriage is childbearing. Interestingly, because children are considered as the crowning glory of a marriage, evidence shows that in some instances, those who cannot bear children are regarded as unusual and outcasts. These ones could be isolated; those close to them may neglect them due to the beliefs and practices of some harmful traditional engagement. They become prone to all kinds and manners of child maltreatment. Although childbearing is applauded, male children are given more priority than female children. These are some of the prevalent cultural practices or social issues that propel abuses in marriage and family life and extend to social relations. This is a gap the researcher tends to fill.

The prevalence and pervasiveness of all forms of child maltreatment and its effect on family life, human development and social stability makes social services a great concern. VAN against children is endemic as well as problematic for the Nigerian children. Among the Igbos, some notable causes of abuses and neglects against children are poverty, unstable economy, stress, serious marital problems, unwanted pregnancy, unemployment, poor educational background, etc. (Ugwuanyi and Zbigniew, 2018) Unfortunately, there are cultural acceptances or attitudes among the Igbos which attract abuses and neglects. These include acceptance of the use of punishment, acceptance of child hawking, acceptance of child or early marriage, and acceptance of child as house help or nanny (Ugwuanyi and Zbigniew, 2018). Hence, this research calls for active and participative measures of social workers, interest groups, community efforts, educational and media agents, the government, and the NGOs to downplay these inhuman trends.

On a worthy note, religion has played vital roles and influenced so greatly in the world today. Naturally speaking, religion is a universal phenomenon and a lifelong force. It has shaped lives and relationships, built as well as ruined societies, directed the affairs of nations, propelled wars and resolved conflicts, attracted scholarly discourses and debates, and sustained the realities and uncertainties of life here and hereafter. However, it has an inherent interest in parenting, which is family life and child upbringing. Parental religiosity and believing that religion plays a great role in familiar life may be as a result of the children's wellness (Petts, 2011). The most of the life of a child is strongly associated with the parents' involvement or simply put, parental religiosity. In sum, religion is important and relevant to virtually all aspects of life, family, and community. Religion has always been a force to

reckon in the fight against child abuse. However, to Africa, and Nigeria in particular, it remains a challenge and concern in this present age. The researcher believes that religion can prosper in and through this challenge when everyone has a role to play in this.

Literature Review: An Overview of Child Abuse

"In UK, if you abuse your children, they will be taken from you."

Debbie Ariyo, OBE (2022)

Defining child abuse and neglect requires the understanding of a child. The definition of a child varies from one school of thought to another. The way a child is conceived in the Western world is quite different from an African. According to both the United Nations Convention on Rights and Responsibilities of the African Child, a person that is under the age of eighteen is considered a child (Fan, 2005). In the African cultural context, every child is seen as a potential leader in his or her community or the world at large, hence should be accorded national and worldwide recognition (Otteh, et al, 2009). Relatively, the Holy scripture would always describe a child, whether a son or daughter, a male or female, old or young, as a human creation fashioned in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26), and a heritage and reward from the Lord (Psalm 127:3). A child can be a human, social or a religious / spiritual being.

World Health Organization (WHO) defines child maltreatment "as the abuse and neglect that occurs to children under eighteen years of age. It includes all types of physical and/or emotional ill-treatment, sexual abuse, neglect, negligence and commercial or other exploitation, which results in actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development or dignity in the context of a relationship or responsibility, trust or power" (WHO, 2022). The publication of the Office for

Victims of Crime (OVC), which is part of the Office for Justice of Programs (OJP), within the Department of Justice, of the United States of America, pointed out that: Children are some of the most vulnerable members of the society (OVC, April 20, 2022). They are subjects of abuses, molestations, exploitations, neglects, labor and other violence-related cases.

Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA), as amended by the CAPTA Reauthorization Act of 2010, defines child abuse as “any recent act or failure to act on the part of a parent or caregiver that results in death, serious physical or emotional harm, sexual abuse, or exploitation, or an act or failure to act that presents an imminent risk of serious harm” (CAPTA, 2010). According to Africans Unite Against Child Abuse (ADRUCA), there are many reasons why children experience child abuse. These include some cultural and religious practices, ignorance and illiteracy, poverty, vulnerability, wickedness, personal gain, and "I don't care" attitude (AFRUCA, 2009). Child Abuse and Neglect can be perpetrated by caregivers who can serve in capacities such as biological, foster and adoptive parents, guardians, kin or other adults within the family circle or outside of it. It is either done privately or publicly, and usually to inflict physical or psychological wound that could potentially affect the life of the children involved.

Child abuse is a global health problem. Children who are abused or neglected are likely to experience health challenges such as physical injuries, psychological, emotional, behavioral malaise. They are noticeable with inflictions, lacerations, abrasions, dysfunctions, etc. Children who experience physical abuse may or may not have visible signs of abuse; however, their behaviours may include learning difficulties, brain damage, fear of adult contact, arriving early at school and staying late, mistreating animals, becoming aggressive or

self-destructive (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013). The impact of child abuse and neglect is far reaching and depends on a variety of factors including: age and developmental stage of the child; extent and type of abuse or neglect; the child’s relationship to the abuser; how the abuse or neglect was responded to if discovered or disclosed; the child’s personality traits and inner strength; support received by those around him/her; and, the child’s perceptions of threat at the time of and following the event.

An Outlook on Child Neglect

On the other hand, neglect is a broad term describing one of the primary maltreatment types that refer to deprivation, or “the absence of sufficient attention, responsiveness, and protection appropriate to the age and needs of a child” (National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2012). Neglect is the persistent failure to meet a child’s physical or psychological need which is likely to bring about a severe deterioration of the child’s health. It may involve a parent unable to prevent or protect a child from physical hurt, injury or danger. It could mean the failure of child to exercise his or her fundamental human rights such as receiving parental care, educational training, healthcare, socializing with people or peers, attending religious gathering, and benefiting from good governance. There are domains of child neglect which include supervisory on the side of the caregivers, guardians and parents. Others are psychological, physical, medical, emotional, economic or financial, cultural, environmental, and educational. These forms of child neglects are often chronic and devastating to family life and social relations.

Child neglect is one of the common types of child maltreatment, yet goes unreported on a frequent circle. Historical evidence has it that not much has been written about it when compared to child abuse. Cases of child neglect

have three classified stages. The first is the mild neglect. Cases in this context are not reported but could call for caution or attention of the society. The second is moderate neglect. This is when a moderate harm has been done against the victim as a result of failed attempt by the society to address the matter or the child involved. For example, a child who is not properly dressed for a function or for a community gathering may result to this stage. Finally is the severe neglect whereby a serious long-term harm has been meted on the child. However, some significant signs of victims of child neglect are indifferent attitude to the child, a depressing state or outlook, behaves irrationally, abuse of alcohol or drug, sees the child as bad, worthless and burdensome, denies the existence or blames the child for the child's predicament in school or at home. Indicators of neglect are more likely visible in the appearance and behaviour of the child. There are challenges associated with child neglect which includes brain development, poor physical health, adverse process and skills of learning, poor academic performance, emotional and psychological consequences, and finally behavioral problems. In a bid to assuage the condition and as to assist, child neglect victims can receive support from relatives, neighbour, friends, school, employer, health institution, religious institution, recreation programmes, after school programmes and sports, community groups and organizations.

Dimensions of Child Abuse and Neglect

Fan (2005) in his work suggests some different child maltreatments evidently practiced in the world and they are streamlined into five (5), viz:

1. Prenatal abuse. This is also called nutritional abuse and usually starts during pregnancy by the mother. When she fails to eat well, breastfeed the baby, or take in toxic substance, smoke as against doctor's advice, have

inadequate medical attention, exercise, and involved in any kind of abuse, all result to prenatal abuse.

2. Physical Abuse. This involves physical activities that inflict bruises, burns, injuries, and these could lead to death or dreadful situation. For example, a parent can slap or spank a child to unconscious state or a partner could hit the other to death.
3. Sexual Abuse. Children are vulnerable to sexual cases like prostitution, sexual harassment or molestation, female genital mutilation, virginity tests, early marriage, etc. It could come from a school- or class-mates, or from relatives or caregivers, or even from parents (incest).
4. Psychological Abuse. Taunting or degrading of people due to their health or social condition is abusive. Unconducive environment can affect a child mentally. A school poorly structured may affect the child's perception of the school and his or her academic performance will gradually drop.
5. Spiritual Abuse: This is another aspect of abuse where there is a lack of spiritual formation in the life of the child or parents/caregivers. Some cultures in Africa believe that child witchcraft is as a result of spiritual deformation of the child.

According to Biokoro (2014) there are three (3) categories of Child Neglect which are commonplace in our world today. They include Physical, Emotional and Educational Neglect.

1. The Physical Neglect is indicated by abandonment, expulsion, shuttling, nutritional, clothing, disregard for safety and welfare, denial or delay in health care. Inadequate supervision is another aspect of physical neglect that includes lack of appropriate

supervision; exposure to hazards such like safety hazards poison, pin, sharp objects, electric wires, stairs, drugs. We also have the guns, weapons, smoking, and inappropriate caregiving.

2. Emotional neglect involves failure to meet up with the psychological needs of the child. Most times parents are very difficult to access but very severe, and this has a long term effect on the child. Emotional neglect includes inadequate nurturing or affection, chronic or extreme spouse abuse, permitted drug abuse, maladaptive behavior, and isolating oneself.
3. On the final note, there is educational neglected by which permitting habitual absenteeism from school, failure to enroll in school and inattention to academic needs are some of the factors.

Violence Against Children

Umejiaku (2021) defines violence as the use of physical force, accomplished by fury, vehemence and courage, unlawfully exercised with the intent to harm. Violence against children includes all forms of violence against people whether perpetrated by parents or other caregivers, peers, romantic partners, or strangers. Globally, it is estimated that up to 1 billion children aged 2–17 years, have experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence or neglect in the past year. Experiencing violence in childhood impacts lifelong health and well-being.

Types of Violence Against Children

Largely, violence against children pertains to at least one of seven main types of interpersonal violence that tend to transpire at different stages in a child’s development. WHO (2022) fact file has so much to reveal and they include the following:

1. Maltreatment (comprising violent punishment) involves physical, sexual

and psychological/emotional violence; and neglect of infants, children and adolescents by parents, caregivers and other authorities, most often in the home but also in settings such as schools and orphanages.

2. Bullying (containing cyber-bullying) is undesirable hostile behaviour by another child or group of children who are neither siblings nor in a romantic relationship with the victim. It involves repeated physical, psychological or social harm, and often takes place in schools and other settings where children gather, and online.
3. Youth violence is focused among children and young adults aged 10–29 years, occurs most often in community settings between acquaintances and strangers, includes bullying and physical assault with or without weapons (such as guns and knives), and may involve gang violence.
4. Intimate partner violence (or domestic violence) involves physical, sexual and emotional violence by an intimate partner or ex-partner. Although males can also be victims, intimate partner violence disproportionately affects females. It commonly occurs against girls within child marriages and early/forced marriages. Among romantically involved but unmarried adolescents it is sometimes called “dating violence”.
5. Sexual violence includes non-consensual completed or attempted sexual contact and acts of a sexual nature not involving contact (such as voyeurism or sexual harassment); acts of sexual trafficking committed against someone who is unable to consent or refuse; and online exploitation.
6. Emotional or psychological violence includes restricting a child’s movements, denigration, ridicule,

threats and intimidation, discrimination, rejection and other non-physical forms of hostile treatment.

7. Gender based violence which is when violence is directed against girls or boys because of their biological sex or gender identity, any of these types of violence can also constitute gender-based violence.

Consequences of Violence against Children

Violence against children has lifelong effects on the health and well-being of children, families, communities and nations. Violence against children can lead to death. Homicides, often involving weapons such as knives and firearms, are among the top four causes of death among adolescents, with boys making up more than 80% of victims and perpetrators (WHO, 2022). Child abuse can result in serious injuries. For every murder, there are hundreds of victims of youth violence, most of them male, who suffer injuries from physical combat and assault. It can also hamper the development of the brain and nervous system.

Exposure to violence at a young age can impair brain development and damage other parts of the nervous system, as well as the endocrine, circulatory, musculoskeletal, reproductive, respiratory and immune systems, with lifelong consequences. As such, violence against children can negatively affect cognitive development and lead to educational and professional underachievement. It can lead to negative coping behaviours and health risks. Children exposed to violence and other adversities are significantly more likely to smoke, abuse alcohol and drugs, and engage in high-risk sexual behavior. They also have higher rates of anxiety, depression, other mental health problems, and suicide.

Child abuse can lead to unwanted pregnancies, induced abortions, gynecological problems, and sexually transmitted diseases, including

HIV. It is able to contribute to a wide range of non-communicable diseases as children age. The increased risk of cardiovascular disease, cancer, diabetes, and other health conditions is largely due to negative coping and health risk behaviours associated with violence. It affects opportunities and future generations. Children exposed to violence and other adversities are more likely to drop out of school, have difficulty finding and keeping a job, and are at greater risk of victimization and/or perpetrating personal and self-directed violence, through which violence against children can affect the next generation.

Understanding Violence and Abuse against Children in the Nigerian Society

The rate of prevalence of child abuse and neglect in Nigeria is increasingly alarming and its kinds vary from region to region Ojebiyi and Ashimolowo (2015). Nigerian societies from the North to South and from West to East, across the roads, on the streets, on farmlands or building sites, you find traces of violence, abuse and neglect against children. Many have been denied the basics of life and means of livelihood; some have been subjected to increasing fear and frivolous response to the realities of life. Even the government is still struggling with refined and progressive policies, or laws, not just regulations, to care and create a sustainable society where justice against children will be upheld. There are cases of children who were maltreated through molestation such as the Downen school saga. Invariably, violence against children occurs in homes, families, schools, communities and other places where children should feel safe.

According to UNICEF (2015), violence against children sponsored by “End Violence in Nigeria” is a pervasive problem, very immediate to home, in Nigeria, with six out of ten children in the country suffering from one or more kinds of physical, sexual or emotional violence before they attain the age of eighteen.

More than 70 percent have experienced this violence frequently. For example, one in two occasions, children experience physical violence such as punching, kicking, lashing, burning, strangling, attempted drowning, threats or being hit with a weapon; One in four girls and one in ten boys experience sexual violence; One in five boys and one in six girls experience emotional violence. Mostly, the perpetrators are individuals the child knows. Violence usually takes place where the child needs to be secured - in their homes, at the neighbor's house, at school, and on the way to and from school. The large majority of lads never communicate their ordeals, quieted down by uncertainty, fear, shame, stigma, and a lack of knowledge of where to seek help. Less than five per cent of child casualties of violence get the assistance they need to recoup.

Build Africa (2022) reports said that across sub-Saharan Africa, which my country Nigeria falls, a high percentage of families are in severe poverty, and total disarray, unlike in the Western world where parenting has gained wide acceptance and support. When families are struggling to survive, educating the children seems not a priority. School fees are usually expensive, and so children are forced to drop out of school and fetch a living for themselves. Many are found in the streets as hawkers, or on the farm or building sites as laborers. Some are given out as caregivers in average or wealthy homes, the horrible cycle goes on. Same reports (2022) have it that in sub-Sahara Africa, (1) 48.5 % of the population live on less than \$1.25 a day; (2) 28% of children are child laborers (the largest proportion in the world); and (3) if a mother can read, her child is 50% more likely to live past 5 years old. This ugly situation has affected the human development of Africa over time. This has made many Africans turn to religion to help them out of this social mess. For example, Nigeria was reported severally to be the most religious country in the world as a

result of the proliferation of religion and massive religious presence.

- Joshua Bassey of Business Day Newspaper of September 1, 2022 reported that cases of domestic violence, child abuse, sexual and physical assaults spiked in the last ten months in Lagos to 4,860, just as the state government said it equally increased legal presentation for the victims during this period. The domestic and sexual violence awareness programme is celebrated yearly in the month of September. This year's theme was "It Is On US". Moyosore Onigbanjo, the attorney-general and commissioner for justice, at a briefing during this year's Domestic and Sexual Violence Awareness Month, said there were 2,029 domestic violence cases, 65 rape cases, 40 sexual assault cases, 10 attempted rape cases, five sexual assault by penetration, 73 threat to life and 488 others, such as separation, neglect. These cases were reported between September 1, 2021 and July 31, 2022. Others include 113 child abuse/physical assault, 194 defilement cases, 15 defilement/molestation by minor to minor, 105 child labour, abduction neglect and 145 sexual harassment/molestation cases. He said that a total of 1,578 children suffered emotional abuse, with 55 percent of these taken through counseling programmes to be able to psychologically handle their ugly experiences without having a lasting negative consequence on them.

Premium Times of August 20, 2022 reported that Nigeria recorded a five percent increase in violent cases against children between 2016 and 2021, according to the 2021 Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS), developed by the

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The survey revealed that 90 per cent of children between the ages of 1 to 14 encountered at least one form of violent punishment by caregivers in 2021. The survey also revealed that Cross River and Imo states accounted for the highest level of violent punishment with 99 percent, while Sokoto State accounted for the lowest level of violent punishment with 62 percent. On child labour, the survey recorded a 19 percent reduction within the same year under review, as 50 percent of children of ages 5 to 17 experienced child labour in 2016 reduced to 30 percent in 2021. It stated that the smallest proportions of children engaged in child labour are found in Lagos (10 percent) and Ondo (9 percent), while the largest proportions are in Bauchi (55 percent) and Katsina (50 percent). The Nigerian society is plagued with cases of sexual abuses in all sectors, from educational, political, economic, to socio-cultural vis-a-vis religious sector (Ituma, et al, 2013). However, child abuse appears in different forms, it can be sexual exploitation, torture, child labour, trafficking, abduction and child marriage. In Central and West Africa, it is estimated that about 35 percent of children are engaged in child labour. United Nations estimate that about 15 million Nigerian children under the age of 14 are working. Economic downturn in many families is another factor that can lead to child abuse. Many poor parents who are unable to cater for their children end up giving some of them out as housemaids or houseboys. Some of these abused children come from polygamous and large families where their welfare is not a priority. This is more prevalent in northern part of the country. Some of them drop out of school. Some end up in the streets as hawkers or beggars.

According to Fan (2005), child abuse and neglect evident in Nigeria include nutritional abuse which involves poor dieting, inadequate healthcare, toxic intakes during pregnancy. Parental neglect is another familiar

maltreatment from the parents to children. Most times care for children is left at the mercies of caregivers or house helps, while parents have little or no time for their children. Taunting and mocking children are abusive treatments mostly done to the disabled or disordered children. Physical and sexual abuse is common in the Nigerian society. During physical contact, children become victims of forceful attack or sexual intercourse. Unconducive schooling or social environment is a potential factor contributing to abuse and neglect. This could affect the child's psyche, emotions, and intellectual capacity. Harmful traditions and cultural practices are another contributor to abuse and neglect. Child or early marriage, isolation, female genital mutilation, and male child syndrome are a few of these harmful cultural practices. Child labour and trafficking are rampant and ravaging in the Nigerian society. Children are enforced to engage in child labour, exploited as sex workers, become apprentices at early age, dropped off school, etc. Some venture into social crimes like robbery, pickpocket, and deviant acts.

For example, in Igboland of Nigeria, millions of school age children are found in the streets hawking, in farm or building sites labouring, at homes as caregivers with cumbersome responsibilities and earning little or nothing. I remember growing up in the suburbs of Onitsha, a commercial city in Southeast Nigeria, where school age children wandered the streets either hawking or on errands, in viewing centers watching live soccer matches or playing video games, in uncompleted building smoking, in market places as labourers. or apprentices to their masters when they were supposed to be in school. These ugly scenarios are quite typical among the Igbo people of Southeast. The boys believe so much to be rich early as to enjoy life in the days of their youth. The girls are married off so early, while some leave school to engage in caregiving. Some are engaged as sales girl. In

this modern time, we find the boys and girls working in motels, cafes, restaurants, market places where they could be easily exposed to sexual, physical and emotional abuses. Many today are passing through domestic violence in the community from peers and local authorities. All these eyesores, the researcher intends to address, hence a call for social intervention in terms of work and policies in progressing family and social cohesion.

The following are some of the major causes of child abuse and neglect. Ojebiyi and Ashimolowo (2015), offer six out of the many causes. Poverty seems to be in the headline. Ibrahim, et al (2022) opine that poverty is the biggest cause of child abuse among children in Nigeria. Others are family composition and stress, illiteracy, ignorance, cultural practices like child marriage, genital mutilation, virginity rest, male child syndrome, girl child issues, and family size (Uzuegbu, 2010). Lack of awareness of the rights of child by the parent, lack of reliable data, major marital problems, unwarranted pregnancy, disabilities and disorders in children, unemployment / unstable economy are prevailing causes that have eaten deep into the Nigerian society. Lack of parenting skills, education, religiosity, and developmental history can necessitate child abuse and neglect. On the other hands there are attitudinal factors to child abuse and neglect. According to Ugwuanyi and Zbigniew (2018), there are four attitudes that encourage child abuse. They are acceptance of the use of physical abuse, acceptance of child hawking, acceptance of the child for early marriage, acceptance of the child as house help.

The proponents of violence against children (VAC) are traceable to their social and cultural norms, including the use of violent or corporal discipline, violence against women and community acceptable views about witchcraft, all of which can potentially propel children's vulnerability. Those involved are vulnerable to all manners of dangers like permanent physical

injuries or death, depression, anxiety disorder, suicidal thoughts and attempts, self-harming, low self-esteem, inferiority complex, increased fear, guilt and self-blame, aggressive behavior and other behavioral problems, violence to cause harm to the child, mental disorder, learning disorders, including poor language and cognitive development, developmental delay, eating disorders and physical ailments. It may interest my audience to know that I have gone through this cruel path as a child with my two older siblings when we went to live with one of our uncles. It was horrible, yet worth appreciating God for the ordeals we were subjected to. We went through all kinds of abuse and neglect such as heavy duties and punishment, physical injury, neglect of care, denial of rights, verbal assaults, etc. It was a letter which my elder sister wrote to my mother that eventfully called for social intervention and our return back home. Invariably, this study will embed a sense of hope into victims of child abuse and neglect and bring succor to the survivors.

A recent public opinion poll conducted by NOIPolls in 2022 has revealed that child abuse is prevalent in Nigeria, as revealed by 88 percent of adult Nigerians nationwide. Also, the poll revealed that 51 percent of adult Nigerians admitted that they had personally observed children suffer offensive treatment in their neighborhoods. The South-South (57 percent) and North-West (56 percent) zones had more respondents who made this assertion (NOIPolls, 2022). This is indeed a disturbing statistics and everything possible must be done to cut short this cruel act as soon as possible. The poll result also uncovered the types of abuse children undergo in their areas and they include physical abuse (35 percent), sexual abuse (28 percent) and abandonment (21 percent) amongst other types. A higher percentage of adult Nigerians nationwide noted poverty (35 percent) and parental neglect (32 percent) as the main causes of child abuse in the country. For example, Nigeria has the largest

number of child brides in Africa with more than 23 million girls and women who were married as children, most of them from poor and rural communities.

Religion has tended to provide a platform for the practice of social welfare. Religious groups and institutions have succeeded to a great measure in contributing meaningfully to the lives of people who are suffering and differing in perception as regards the increasing cases of child abuse and neglect. For example, the general pastor of Omega Power Ministry, Pastor Chibuzor Gift Chinyere over the years has been known for giving numerous scholarships, operating free education, helping displaced people begin on a fresh page, engaging people on skills acquisition, and doing other humanitarian services. The gifting of house and car to the family of late Deborah who was killed by the Muslim fanatics is a recent example (Vanguard, 24 May, 2022) The Church has tuition-free schools, and is currently nursing a project of a free university. We still have other religious organizations who share or already trend in such line of social welfare. In Nigeria there are some faith-based communities who have contributed so immensely to the educational growth of the nation. For example, there are faith based universities that provide quality and sound education most especially to our children and youth, even in a time when tertiary institutions are on labour strike since February 14, 2022. Paul University, Awka, where I did my theological studies produce clerical and secular graduates each year. It is commonplace to say or see the extent religious movements and institutions have done so well in providing social welfare by opening the gates of opportunities like jobs, and other social services, for either long term or short term. Virtually, all religious entities are job creators.

On the part of the economy, religious bodies are a contributing factor. Many pastors of churches in Nigeria today are rich and worship centers usually filled up. Churches now pay tax. Some

are working class people who help in delivering social welfare packages and counsels. It is pertinent to say at this point that religion is a strong force and a big factor in history. Some religious bodies are involved in relief works, especially providing the basics for the children. They also serve by joining forces with the locals in providing social amenities, such as accessible roads, hospital, etc. Some churches have proven their worth in politics with their leaders or pastors joining the political terrain, The likes of Pastor Chris Okotie, Prophet Isa El-Buba, Pastor Tunde Bakare, and Pastor Yemi Osibanjo, who is currently the Vice President of Nigeria, are worthy of mention. Some religious leaders have joined in the round table discussion on the pressing needs bothering the nation or region. These leaders are naturally part of the national conference that talks about unity, security and social integration. The Church has flourished in the context of social integration. Pastors preach and relate to the world through social media like Facebook, WhatsApp, Instagram, tik tok, etc. It has served as a foreground for the churches or other faith based communities to speak or reach out.

Religious Response to Violence, Abuse and Neglect Against Children in the Nigerian Society

Psalm 23:1 says,

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.”

Parental Religiosity in the face of Child Abuse and Neglect

Koch, et al (2018), in the exploration on religion and spirituality of teens, have convincingly indicated that religiosity seems to be a significant component in molding a relationship between parents and children. It goes further to impact on family interactions by prohibiting unacceptable behaviours and activities that do not benefit family cohesion and relationships. Religion has consistently been influential and still has much to offer in

child-rearing. A multicultural study conducted in the UK by a group of researchers (2008) establish the fact that religious principles and practices have the probable tendency to impact on many aspects of life, including family life and social relations. They went on to say that the need to understand more about the influence of religion is having a significantly growing impact, and their study allows people to understand the correlation between parents and children. This understanding helps to minimize abuses or violence in the family circle.

Noreen, et al (2020) is of the view that parents are the essential basis of the transmission of their religiosity to successive generation. Recent analysis done to better appreciate the cycle of religious transmission and adoption has positive outcomes about family ties and social affairs. Researchers have proven that parents play a significant role in nurturing their children's religious development. Most religious parents would invariably want their children to have such religious integrity, and these children show a keen interest in adopting and conforming to these principles and practices. Relatively, the Canadian Council of Learning (2008) has highlighted the importance of the parent-child relationship. Research shows that the early stages are a crucial time in a child's life, and each moment brings a new adventure, a new opportunity to understand and thrive. These years are integral for developing the emotional, social, physical, language, and thinking techniques a child will need throughout life. Every stage in a child's life and development matters because it enhances the veracity and tenacity of developmental stages as he or she matures in a given environment.

O'Neil, et al (2010) has a lot to share with us concerning the influence of religion in intervening and preventing all forms of child maltreatment. The roles religion plays encompasses education, providing support and services, reporting cases and partnering. It

points also to good parenting. It goes further to suggest the need for religious organizations and interest group to speak out. The role of religion in collaboration with the communities in providing social services cannot be underestimated. There are so many religious movements, institutions and agencies evidently in operation in Nigeria. Reports have shown that religiosity, which is one's adherence to religious teachings, attendance at worship and other religious conventions, and participation in church sponsored groups, and fellowships, serves as both preventative and preservative factors against abusive behaviour, and a valuable resource for those recovering from abuse. Involvement in a religious group helps families cope with stress enhance support network. Sometimes, churches offer direct preventative measures aimed at parents such as parenting education, parenting skills, safe and affordable healthcare, and counseling session.

Therefore, we briefly discuss the various roles religion plays in fighting against violent acts, abusive conditions and neglectful perjury among children in Nigeria.

1. Educating the people generally. One important approach to solving the issue of violence, abuse and neglect is the need for proper and persistent enlightenment. The Bible said that God's people perish because they lack understanding. Education has so much to impact, enlighten, expose, and instruct in people's lives and ministry. Education is key!
2. Problem solving as a call to serve. We need to understand that our relationship with God and involvement in religious practices are geared toward solving human and social problems. The church for example is a place where sinners come to gain salvation. It is a place where we receive God's word for the work ahead. Same word is needed to transform the lives of children.

3. Accepting and regarding seriously cases of VAN against children. Many affected have not publicly made their cases. It is pertinent we accept child maltreatment as a daily painful reality behind closed doors. When a problem or situation is revealed, it is believed it is half solved. Religion has so much to expose when it comes to VAN against children.
4. Supporting program, follow-up studies, etc. is another aspect of religious response to VAN against children. These supports and services help in lessening the burdens of government. For example, there is social welfare department in some churches which helps in providing assistance and social services to members of the church and public as a whole.
5. Reporting of abuse and neglect will help to fight off the problem. Most times the Church finds it difficult and indifferent to report such cases. A regular report to the appropriate quarters or law enforcement agency will help social service providers checkmate the plight and adversities associated with child maltreatment. There is always a need to speak out!
6. Showing unwavering concern for the safety of the children. Religious groups, organizations and institutions are expected to publicly show unequivocal interest for daily care of children and building capacity and sustainability for their future. Religious leaders are expected to defend the rights of the children through advocacy and other direct contact agencies. Child's right should be upheld.
7. Partnering for successful and broader social services. This is where collaboration is highly needed. There is need to call out on other social services or welfare providers, government and nongovernmental organizations, investors in public or private sectors, individuals, who share same interest and whose goals and objectives means well for the children.
8. Parenting is a key actor in the prevention of child abuse and neglect. Positive parenting speaks greatly and assures good moments during parent – child relationship. Understanding how a family should run and the roles each member plays guarantees a steady home. It rarely paves way for intentional harmful practices or treatments.
9. Preaching against all forms of child maltreatment in different gatherings, fellowships, seminars, symposia, convention, reunions, day in day out, as means of sensitization. Religious leaders should use scriptural examples to demonstrate the need, join efforts, to deal with it. They should let them know that God detest it. It is a condemnable act or practice and must be avoided.
10. Praying and watching is a collective response of religious groups or interest groups. Churches, mosques, synagogues, temples, and other religious centers should rise to say NO to all forms of violence, abuse and neglect against children, not just in Nigeria, but beyond. I believe so much that prayers change everything.

On the part of the Church, child abuse is both a sin and a crime (Vieth, et al, 2012). There is a clarion call for the universal church and other religious institutions to intervene or prevent all forms of violence and abuse against children. This involves creating awareness, training of personnel, partnering for progress and actively participating in outreach programs. Invariably, this is a call for both the local and international Church to prevent, respond and train workers who will wholesomely address issues concerning violence and abuse against children.

In making this call there is a tendency to look into the spiritual aspect of the children affected with violence or abuse. For a successful prevention of all forms of child maltreatment, the following are of great consideration. Vieth, et al (2012) opine what should be expected from the Church, and this includes: having a positive response to allegations and issues bothering child abuse or violence, training and equipping workers for social welfare services, providing technical assistance to Christian Churches and institutions, developing publications and other materials for churches as well as developing research centers. Sensitizing the faith based communities on the prevalent issues affecting the children. Finally, addressing the spiritual needs of the people.

Conclusion

Violence, abuse and neglect against children is deformable, uncomfortable and as well unacceptable in any society of the world. Approximately, 1 billion people, both old and young, male and female, from different cultural backdrops, permeating the developed and developing world, have experienced, either or all of, violence, abuse and neglect. The outcomes are usually dreadful and sometimes causing death. Perpetrators are not far-fetched, but are part of the immediate environment. Parents share in the blame and shame. Government has not done much as to implement policies and platforms, no formal or far-reaching awareness in place in most middle and low income countries, including Nigeria. This calls for urgent attention from all quarters. It is high time social work takes full stage and religion to make a strong case against all kinds and manners of violence, abuse and neglect. It is time to rise up, reach out, speak out, so that children will regain their rights and confidence. The fight against VAN will invariably minimize the chances of children living in fear and discontentment

On the other hand, raising godly and hardworking children with a sense of civic and moral responsibility seems uneasy at this time. It is not impossible either. Bringing up children requires a sense of religiosity on the part of parents to dutifully and conscientiously fulfill their responsibilities. As parents struggle to raise successful children, they need knowledge and skills to build meaningful relationships with them and create comfortable, loving and committed family relationships and homes. Religious parents believe that God not only provides knowledge, skills, wisdom, and all the necessities good enough for parenthood but also the pastoral care of their children. It takes both the human and divine commitment of parents to achieve their parental goals and styles in child development. In other words, it takes a godly parent to raise children who pass on the society. It takes parenting to lay a solid foundation for their children who will achieve great success both in the home and society.

The following is a summary of the Nigerian challenge on violence, abuse and neglect against children

1. There is high rate of violence, abuse and neglect against children in Nigeria.
2. Majority of children who encountered VAN in childhood report numerous occurrences. Girls are more likely recipients of these abuses than the boys.
3. VAN starts at young age. Over half of the children who first experienced VAN between age 6 and 11. Approximately, 1 in 11 children experienced it under age 15.
4. Perpetrators are usually and typically those the children relatively know and associate with. A parent or adult relative is commonest. Others include caregivers, neighbours, friends of the family, class or school mates
5. Children are not speaking out, seeking or receiving social services. Most of the recipients of violence or abuse do not receive adequate support or services.

Some parents would prefer holding back than letting out.

6. Violence or abuse has impact on the lives and future of the affected children, both boys and girls. Physical abuse can result to mental consequences. Sexual abuse can lead to sexually transmitted diseases like HIV/AIDS.
7. The prevalent nature of violence and abuse of children calls for social welfare and support to help prevent or intervene in matters that affect human and social development.

Recommendations

1. Religious groups and their affiliations should champion sound education in order to enlighten families and societies the prevalence and dangers of violence, abuse and neglect against children. This could be realizable through seminars, counseling, and outreach programmes.
2. Positive parenting is required. Parents are to engage their children on direct conversation most especially in matters of sexuality. Parents are to involve themselves fully in religious activities

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as part of moral upbringing and spiritual development of the child.

3. Government at all levels should speed up in enforcing laws and policies that will help prevent violence, abuse and neglect against children in Nigeria. Government is to finance vital programs as part of the national empowerment scheme to alleviate social problems in the Nigerian society.
4. There should be a collaboration of social services providers to help curb the menace of VAN. These organizations, whether public or private, profit making or non-profit making, should join expertise and experiences gathered to fight against VAN in Nigeria.
5. It is necessary that religious groups should preach, pray and practice the care and attention for every child. This, I believe, will go a long way in fight against violence, abuse and neglect against children and to uphold the right of the child.

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