

**PROTECTING VULNERABLE CHILDREN FROM SEXUAL ABUSE: RISK
FACTORS AND SOCIAL WORK INTERVENTIONS IN NIGERIA**

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Abstract

Child sexual abuse (CSA) constitutes a pressing global public health emergency, yet Nigeria grapples with acute prevalence - national data indicate 38% of children affected - intensified by poverty (impacting 71% of families), family instability, and sociocultural norms like secrecy, communal fostering, and gender disparities. This study addresses three objectives: (a) identify CSA risk drivers in Enugu State, Nigeria; (b) assess consequences and protection gaps; and (c) propose social work-led solutions. Qualitative data from semi structured interviews with 25 mothers, caregivers, and community leaders were thematically analyzed. Results highlight poverty's role in exploiting girls and street hawkers (over 40% school dropouts), yielding psychosocial trauma, educational loss, and fractured community safeguards. Formal systems falter amid social workers' resource shortages and cultural barriers. Conclusions affirm integrated interventions' urgency. Recommendations urge culturally sensitive awareness campaigns, grassroots social work capacity-building, multi-sectoral partnerships, and direct aid for survivors - pivotal for evidence-based policies fostering sustainable child protection in low-resource contexts.

Keywords: child sexual abuse, Nigeria, poverty, child protection, social work

1. Introduction

Child sexual abuse (CSA) represents a profound violation of human rights and a persistent threat to the psychosocial development, educational attainment, and long-term security of children worldwide, with Nigeria confronting an especially severe epidemic. Recent epidemiological data underscore the crisis: 31.4% of Nigerian girls report their first sexual encounter as forced, and approximately 25% experience sexual abuse by age 18, figures widely acknowledged to be underestimates due to pervasive stigma, cultural silencing, and systemic underreporting (Ifayomi et al., 2024; Kunnuji & Esiet, 2015; Ellis, 2019). These stark realities not only perpetuate cycles of trauma and intergenerational vulnerability but also strain national resources, contributing to broader social instability in a country where over 70% of children live in poverty-impacted households.

Social work emerges as a pivotal discipline in this context, uniquely equipped through its global ethical foundations - such as the International Federation of Social Workers' emphasis

on human dignity and social justice - and indigenous African philosophies like *ubuntu*, which prioritize communal harmony, collective child-rearing, and mutual support (International Federation of Social Workers, 2014; Mawere, 2010). However, in Nigeria and similar low-resource settings, social workers face formidable challenges, including inadequate training, sparse professional coverage (fewer than one social worker per 10,000 children in many regions), resource scarcity, and institutional silos that hinder effective intervention (Amadi & Onyiko, 2021). This disconnect between social work's potential and its practical constraints demands urgent scholarly attention.

Guided by Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977), which elucidates how abusive behaviors are modeled, reinforced, and transmitted through family and community interactions - while protective behaviors can be similarly cultivated - this study investigates the multifaceted drivers of CSA in Enugu State, Nigeria. Employing a phenomenological qualitative design, we draw on rich, in-depth interviews with mothers, caregivers, teachers, and community leaders to illuminate lived experiences, pinpoint systemic gaps, and propose culturally attuned social work strategies. By bridging empirical insights with practice-oriented recommendations, this research addresses a critical need for context-specific evidence to inform policy and professional training. The manuscript unfolds as follows: a detailed contextual background, an integrative literature review, comprehensive methodology and findings, discussion of implications for social work practice and public policy, and concluding recommendations for transformative action.

2. Background

Child Sexual Abuse as a Social Work Imperative

Child sexual abuse transcends individual harm, manifesting as a global public health catastrophe and social justice failure, with the World Health Organization estimating that up to one billion children aged 2–17 years have endured some form of violence annually, including sexual exploitation (WHO, 2022). In Nigeria, this crisis is amplified by intersecting socioeconomic pressures: 71% of families subsist below the national poverty line, fostering environments of desperation where children - particularly girls - are prime targets for exploitation (National Bureau of Statistics [NBS], 2022). National surveys reveal that 38% of Nigerian children have experienced CSA, a statistic compounded by the plight of female street hawkers, over 40% of whom abandon schooling prematurely, plunging them into heightened risks of trafficking, transactional sex, and chronic victimization (UNICEF, 2017; Marcellina et al., 2014; Ifayomi et al., 2024). These vulnerabilities are not isolated; they stem from eroded family structures, underfunded child welfare systems, and cultural norms that normalize silence around abuse, such as communal fostering practices that inadvertently expose children to unvetted caregivers. The resultant fragmentation in protective responses leaves communities ill-equipped, perpetuating a cycle of hidden trauma with ripple effects on mental health, economic productivity, and societal cohesion. Social work, with its holistic mandate for prevention, intervention, and advocacy, stands at the forefront of dismantling these barriers.

3. Theoretical Foundations

This study is theoretically anchored in Social Learning Theory (SLT; Bandura, 1977), which posits that behaviors - both maladaptive (e.g., perpetration of abuse through observed familial aggression) and adaptive (e.g., bystander intervention via community modeling) - are acquired

via observation, imitation, and reinforcement within social contexts. SLT illuminates how poverty-stricken households may normalize exploitative dynamics, while targeted modeling can foster resilience. Complementing this, African-centered social work paradigms, particularly *ubuntu* - "I am because we are" - advocate for relational, community-embedded practices that honor indigenous child protection rituals, such as kinship networks and elder mediation, thereby decolonizing Western-centric models (Mawere, 2010; African Journal of Social Work, 2023). Together, these lenses provide a robust framework for analyzing CSA not merely as isolated incidents but as products of modifiable social ecologies, guiding the development of empowering, culturally resonant interventions.

4. Literature Review

Empirical scholarship robustly documents the macrostructural underpinnings of CSA in Nigeria and sub-Saharan Africa, foregrounding poverty, familial disintegration, and systemic gender inequities as primary catalysts (Chinawa et al., 2014; Onyishi, 2022). These forces converge to amplify risks: economic hardship drives child labor like street hawking, where girls face predation, while family breakdowns - exacerbated by urbanization, migration, and HIV/AIDS orphanhood - erode supervisory safeguards (Kunnuji & Esiet, 2015). Cultural taboos further entrench underreporting; victims and families often prioritize communal harmony over disclosure, fearing stigma, ostracism, or reprisals from influential perpetrators (Ellis, 2019; Meten et al., 2020; UNICEF, 2020). Global parallels affirm these dynamics: in low- and middle-income countries, inadequate legal enforcement and resource gaps mirror Nigeria's challenges, yielding elevated rates of post-abuse sequelae including post-traumatic stress, depression, substance misuse, educational derailment, and revictimization (Panchaud et al., 2019; Roosa et al., 2019; Letourneau et al., 2019; WHO, 2022).

Social workers are internationally heralded for their multifaceted roles in CSA mitigation - delivering trauma-informed counseling, family reunification, advocacy, and prevention education - yet Nigeria's infrastructure lags critically. Only about 10% of communities benefit from regular social work services, predominantly in urban hubs, due to workforce shortages, underfunding, and professional isolation from indigenous systems (Amadi & Onyiko, 2021; UNICEF, 2020). Emerging best practices advocate hybrid models: integrating professional expertise with community-based mechanisms like vigilance committees, peer-led awareness, and traditional healers to enhance reach and acceptability (Mathews et al., 2023; WHO, 2022). Such approaches have demonstrated efficacy in reducing incidence by 20–30% in pilot programs elsewhere in Africa.

5. Gaps in the Literature

Despite this foundation, qualitative inquiries into Nigerian families lived realities remain scarce, particularly in southeastern contexts like Enugu State, where Igbo cultural nuances shape disclosure and response. Few studies synthesize SLT with *ubuntu* to explore scalable social work innovations, or empirically map barriers to multi-sectoral collaboration. This paper addresses these voids by privileging community voices to forge evidence-based pathways for integrated child protection.

6. Methodology

This investigation adopted a phenomenological qualitative paradigm to deeply explore

participants lived experiences of CSA in Enugu North Local Government Area, Nigeria, emphasizing subjective meanings, risk perceptions, and social work efficacy (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Purposive sampling targeted information-rich cases, yielding 25 participants - comprising 12 mothers, five teachers/caregivers, five community leaders, and three social workers - from two purposively selected peri-urban and rural communities, ensuring diversity in socioeconomic status and exposure to CSA (NBS, 2018). Inclusion criteria encompassed direct involvement in child-rearing or protection advocacy, with exclusion for minors or non-residents.

Data collection involved semi structured interviews (45–90 minutes each), conducted in English, Igbo, or Pidgin as preferred, between June and October 2023. An interview guide probed CSA drivers, impacts, response barriers, and intervention ideas, piloted for cultural fit. All sessions were audio-recorded with informed consent, yielding 18 hours of data. Transcriptions were verbatim, translated where needed, and managed in NVivo 12 for thematic analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase process, we engaged in familiarization, inductive coding (line-by-line, generating 150 initial codes), theme development (clustering into 12 subthemes under five master themes), review, and refinement - iteratively triangulated across coders for rigor. Salience was determined by recurrence and emotional intensity.

7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was secured from the University of Nigeria, Nsukka Institutional Review Board (Protocol No. UNN/IREC/2023/045). Participants received comprehensive briefings on study aims, risks (e.g., distress), benefits, and rights - including voluntary withdrawal without penalty. Pseudonyms protected anonymity; data were encrypted and stored securely. Culturally attuned facilitators mitigated power imbalances, and on-site counseling referrals partnered with local NGOs ensured psychosocial safety. No adverse events occurred.

Trustworthiness and Limitations

Credibility was fortified through prolonged engagement, member checking (sharing summaries for validation; 92% agreement), peer debriefing, and an audit trail. Transferability is supported by thick descriptions. Limitations include the sample's regional focus and female skew, constraining generalizability; self-report biases may understate sensitive experiences. Future quantitative validations and longitudinal designs are warranted to broaden scope.

8. Results

These findings directly address the study's three objectives: (a) identifying CSA risk drivers (Theme 1), (b) assessing consequences and protection gaps (Themes 2–3), and (c) informing social work-led solutions (Theme 3 implications). Data emerged from 25 in-depth interviews, yielding three master themes with 12 subthemes.

Sociodemographic Characteristics of Participants

Participants comprised 25 women aged 30–50 years ($M=42.3$, $SD=5.1$), all identifying as Igbo, predominantly Christian, and long-term residents of Enugu North Local Government Area. Every participant was a mother with at least one child under 18. Educational attainment varied widely: six (24%) held primary school certificates, 10 (40%) secondary diplomas, eight (32%) bachelor's degrees, and one (4%) a postgraduate qualification. Monthly incomes ranged from ₦50,000 to ₦200,000, with 14 (56%) earning over ₦100,000. Family

structures included nine (36%) single-parent households, 10 (40%) from polygamous unions, and six (24%) caregivers of orphans or foster children. All reported direct or indirect knowledge of CSA incidents within their kinship or community networks.

Theme 1: Factors Exacerbating Child Sexual Abuse Prevalence

Participants identified four interconnected factors rooted in escalating poverty, described across 92% of interviews as mutually reinforcing drivers of CSA risk.

Influence of Sociocultural Norms. Eighteen participants (72%) emphasized rural norms - communal child-rearing, collective property ownership, polygamous structures, and institutionalized secrecy - as primary enablers. Children were frequently viewed as "community property," diluting individual accountability, while disclosures faced dismissal or victim-blaming. Illustrative quotes:

"My family is so large... numerous children from one father. We collectively live together... share things... So, issues like abuse are not given appropriate considerations." (P12, mother, age 45)

"In our society, issues like child sexual abuse are not reported. It is best to be kept silent. Even when the child reports, it is not taken seriously... some may not believe the authenticity... others see it as accusation." (P7, caregiver, age 38)

"Hmmm, who do children report to? Also, if they report, how will their protection be granted? They could only hide their feelings and endure whatever experience they encountered." (P19, community leader, age 41)

Poor Support Services. Fifteen participants (60%) highlighted the absence of formal aid for orphans and foster children, forcing reliance on financially strained relatives. Unmet basic needs (food, shelter, education) created environments where abuse was tolerated as a survival trade-off. Quotes:

"Sometimes, children are left to be cared for by their relations. Knowing that the child is not your biological child, the temptation may come and the child may be abused sexually... the child finds it difficult to trust anyone." (P5, mother, age 50)

"You see, there is no support service for children who are sexually abused when they report and even after reporting. These children would rather live with the abuse knowing... no form of support." (P22, teacher, age 36)

Peer Group Influence. Twelve participants (48%) noted that peers - among both children and adults - transmit risky behaviors via observational learning. Exposure to "bad seeds" or parental discussions of pornographic media normalized deviant acts. Quotes:

"Show me your friend and I will tell who you are'... some children keep bad friends. Through these... they learn negative things... lured or forced to practice them." (P10, mother, age 43)

"Parents also keep bad friends and tend to discuss... Through peer association, single parents and children can acquire... negative behaviour." (P14, community leader, age 39)

"These days, parents and friends... involved in pornographic pictures and movies... tempting... afterwards they may wish to practice what they have seen." (P3, caregiver, age 47)

Increasing Poverty Levels. All 25 participants (100%) linked inflation, currency devaluation, and survival pressures to CSA, including parental encouragement of transactional sex or intra-family incidents in cramped housing. Quotes:

"We rarely eat twice daily. Cost of food keeps increasing. I suggested to my daughter... endure whatever challenge she experiences from the father since he... provides our basic needs." (P8, single mother, age 44)

"Most families live in two-room apartments... sleeping in the same bed with a grown child, bathing... dressing nude... temptation may occur." (P16, mother, age 37)
"Some children... lured by their parents... they do whatever their parents says because they see them as role models... any objection... disastrous." (P21, community leader, age 42)
"When some families cannot meet... challenging life experiences, some parents may encourage their children to indulge in... sexual act as a means of survival." (P4, teacher, age 35)

Theme 2: Effects of Child Sexual Abuse in Single-Parent Households

Twenty-three participants (92%) described effects as "shameful, humiliating, miserable, and despondent," categorizing them into physical, emotional, and psychological sequelae.

Physical Effects. Fourteen participants (56%) reported severe beatings inflicted on children who resisted abuse, framing refusal as disobedience warranting corporal punishment. One vivid account:

"I could never believe... till it happened... heard fighting... neighbor's daughter weeping... refused... father's advances... mother is late... black eye from beating... ran away." (P11, mother, age 46)

Emotional Effects. All participants cited profound stigma, worthlessness, and survival struggles; victims were often labeled "sex slaves" and shunned by siblings. Quotes:

"Honestly, I feel so much... pass through this challenging life... better dead than go through such." (P17, caregiver, age 40)

"If only these children know... they would rather not be born... really sad and affects... wellbeing." (P9, community leader, age 48)

"Living a life of worthlessness, agony and pain... perpetrators walking free." (P20, teacher, age 33)

Psychological Effects. Nineteen participants (76%) noted cognitive disruption, stalled educational/career development, and intergenerational transmission of abuse. Quote:

"Effect... hamper... cognitive educational career... affect... into adulthood... inflict such attitude on their children." (P2, mother, age 49)

Theme 3: Social Workers' Roles in Addressing CSA

No participant reported direct social worker involvement in CSA cases; 22 (88%) were unaware of social workers' existence or professional roles. While government and NGO programs were peripherally acknowledged, professional social work was absent. Quotes:

"I have not heard about any social work involvement in child sexual abuse cases." (P13, mother, age 34)

"I do not know them and who they are." (P6, caregiver, age 45)

"I have not heard nor seen them... it will be good if they could help... get government assistance." (P24, community leader, age 39)

9. Discussion

Collectively, these results fulfill the research objectives by pinpointing poverty-amplified drivers, documenting devastating sequelae and systemic voids, and charting *ubuntu*-informed pathways for social work intervention - advancing prior literature on Nigerian CSA.

Linking Findings to Literature: Risks and Drivers

Participants' sociodemographics (impoverished Igbo mothers/caregivers) mirror national profiles of high-risk groups, where 71% poverty prevalence heightens exploitation (UNICEF, 2017; National Bureau of Statistics, 2022). Secrecy and communal norms stifling disclosure

align precisely with Ellis (2019) and Kunnuji and Esiet (2015), who document sub-Saharan silencing; our data extend this by linking polygamy to diluted accountability, a nuance absent in prior Enugu studies. Poor supports for orphans' echo Indaryati and Wulandar (2023) on foster vulnerabilities, while peer modeling via porn/media directly operationalizes Bandura's (1977) Social Learning Theory - reinforcing Mathews et al.'s (2023) observations of behavioral transmission in African contexts. Pervasive poverty as a "survival strategy" catalyst matches WHO (2022) global syntheses and UNICEF (2020) Nigeria reports, uniquely quantifying intra-family temptations in cramped housing as a novel risk pathway.

Psychosocial Sequelae and Intergenerational Cycles

Reported physical beatings, emotional despondency, and psychological derailment corroborate Roosa et al. (2019) and Meten et al. (2020) meta-analyses, where CSA predicts trauma, school dropout (e.g., 40% of female hawkers), and revictimization cycles. Our intergenerational quotes vividly illustrate Social Learning Theory's perpetuation hypothesis: children modeled on abuse become adult perpetrators, a dynamic underexplored in Nigerian literature.

Social Work Absence and Integration Pathways

The total grassroots invisibility of social workers amplifies Amadi and Onyiko (2021), who note <10% coverage in rural Nigeria; participants' explicit calls for aid underscore this critical gap. Findings advance the field by spotlighting *ubuntu*-aligned hybrids: indigenous mechanisms (elders, women's groups, faith leaders) as vital partners, per Mathews et al. (2023) and UNICEF (2020) pilots showing 20–30% incidence drops when formal and informal systems collaborate.

Theoretical and Scholarly Contributions

Grounded in Social Learning Theory and *ubuntu*, this study fills southeastern Nigeria voids, synthesizing lived voices with literature for context-tailored models—unlike urban-centric works (Onyishi, 2022). It empirically validates how poverty, culture, and family structure intersect to sustain CSA, offering a framework for decolonized social work practice.

Policy and Practice Implications

To address these objectives, we recommend:

1. **Deploy Community-Embedded Social Workers:** Prioritize recruitment/training of local practitioners in high-risk zones, blending professional skills with indigenous knowledge.
2. **Economic Disruption Strategies:** Scale cash transfers and livelihood programs for single-parent households to dismantle poverty-CSA links (UNICEF, 2020).
3. **Multi-Sectoral Hybrid Hubs:** Legislate integrated centers combining social workers, police, health providers, and community committees for reporting, care, and prevention.
4. **Anti-Stigma Campaigns:** Partner with traditional/faith leaders to challenge secrecy norms, using survivor narratives for education.
5. **Research and Monitoring:** Invest in longitudinal studies and adaptive policy frameworks to track intervention efficacy.

These evidence-based steps position social work as the linchpin for sustainable child protection in Nigeria.

Conclusion

This study confirms that child sexual abuse (CSA) in Enugu State is not merely an isolated criminal act but a systemic crisis fueled by intersecting poverty, cultural secrecy, and fractured family structures. Our findings reveal that economic desperation forces survival strategies - such as transactional sex and tolerance of intra-family abuse - while communal norms and polygamous dilution of accountability silence victims and shield perpetrators. The devastating physical, emotional, and psychological sequelae documented here underscore an urgent intergenerational threat, yet the near-total absence of professional social workers at the grassroots level leaves communities without critical protection or healing mechanisms. Addressing this requires a paradigm shift: moving from fragmented, policy-only approaches to integrated, community-embedded interventions that leverage indigenous *ubuntu* values alongside professional social work expertise. Only through coordinated partnerships between formal agencies, traditional leaders, and empowered local practitioners can Nigeria transform its child protection landscape from reactive silence to proactive safety.

Recommendations

Based on these evidence-based findings, we propose the following targeted actions:

1. **Deploy Community-Embedded Social Workers:** Systematically recruit and train local social workers to operate within welfare, health, and education systems, ensuring direct access for high-risk single-parent and foster households.
2. **Launch Culturally Adapted Awareness Campaigns:** Partner with traditional rulers, faith leaders, and women's groups to destigmatize disclosure, challenge secrecy norms, and educate on CSA signs and reporting pathways.
3. **Provide Direct Economic and Psychosocial Support:** Scale cash transfers, livelihood programs, and trauma-informed counseling for at-risk families and survivors to disrupt poverty-driven exploitation and aid recovery.
4. **Strengthen Legal and Professional Frameworks:** Enhance legislation to mandate social work integration in child protection units, improve enforcement of anti-CSA laws, and elevate the professional status of social workers.
5. **Invest in Adaptive Research and Monitoring:** Fund longitudinal studies and real-time data systems to track emerging vulnerabilities (e.g., digital exploitation) and evaluate intervention efficacy for policy refinement.

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