



CHALLENGES IN PRIORITIZING THE BEST INTEREST OF THE CHILD IN CHILD PROTECTION

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Abstract:

Violence against children is a violation of the Child Rights Act and other Conventions governing the rights of children, and the effects of prolonged physical and emotional abuse on a child's cognitive development threaten the proper mental and physical development of the child and, in some cases, the child's survival. Despite the efforts made by the government and non-governmental organizations to protect children, the incidence of child abuse is still on the rise. This study is aimed at identifying challenges and key considerations in prioritizing the best interests of the child in child protection in Nigeria. Two research questions and a hypothesis were raised and formulated for the study. The population of the study consisted of respondents selected from three (3) states in three (3) geopolitical zones in Nigeria. Delta representing the south-south geopolitical zone, Lagos state and Kogi state representing South West and North Central respectively. A sample of 1,120 respondents, which comprised all stakeholders in child protection (parents, educators, health workers and others), was drawn from the total population. Results from the analysis of the data collected using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) revealed that different cultural/traditional practices may harm the well-being of the child. Other factors affecting prioritizing the best interest of the child in child protection in Nigeria, as identified, include corruption, lack of accountability, and insufficient training of child protection personnel, among others. The study recommends, among others, a strong political will and commitment to child protection.

Keywords: challenges, prioritizing, best interest, child protection

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1. Introduction

The best interest of the child in child protection in Nigeria is a paramount consideration in all decisions and actions taken by individuals, organizations and government agencies. This principle is enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Child Rights Act of Nigeria (2003).

Despite being a signatory to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Nigeria still grapples with challenges in ensuring the safety, well-being, and development of its child population. Collaborative effort has been ongoing among child protection stakeholders in ensuring that the best interest of the child is prioritized in child protection efforts in Nigeria.

1.1 Who is a Child?

A child in the Nigerian context is somebody under the age of 18, whose parents are both Nigerians or only the father is by birth a Nigerian, since, in Nigeria, traditionally and conventionally, a child's origin is traced to that of the father and not the mother (Edwin, 2000). Obinaju (2000) also asserted that several limitations are specified, which consider an individual below the age of 18 a child in Nigeria.

1.2 The Best Interest of the Child

The best interest of the child is a child rights principle which derives from Article 3 of the UN Convention (1989). The Best Interest of the Child (BIC) principle is a core consideration in all actions regarding the child, for instance, his education, feeding, shelter and healthcare and so on.

1.3 Child Protection

Child protection systems, according to UNICEF (2023), connect children to vital social services and a fair justice system. Child protection refers to all the steps and measures taken to curtail, prevent and punish all forms of exploitation, violence and abuses against the child. It is therefore the safeguarding of children from neglect, abuse, exploitation and violence.

1.4 Stakeholders in Child Protection

Early childhood is a critical period of learning and development (Atakpo, 2024). The developmental experiences children have while growing up serve as a tool for combating future security challenges, as stated in Atakpo (2020), because whatever developmental experiences they have as children is what they will build upon later on in life, whether negative or positive. Educators, healthcare professionals, social workers and other individuals play a vital role in identifying and addressing child abuse, neglect and exploitation issues. Each stakeholder brings unique skills and knowledge from their various perspective, making their collective efforts essential in protecting vulnerable children.

1.4.1 Educators

The significance of children's educators is the fact that they are responsible for impacting the development of children's mental functions, including language, motor skills, psychosocial skills, cognitive skills and learning (Egwunatum and Atakpo, 2025, Donovan & Burns, 2021). Educators are often the first line of defense when it comes to detecting signs of abuse or neglect in children (they take note of physical appearance, changes in behavior in children). Educators must report to the appropriate authorities, such as the child protective agency or law enforcement agency, so that they can take swift actions that will help prevent further harm to the child.

1.4.2 Healthcare Professionals

They play a vital role in our healthcare system; they also advocate for and counsel children and families (Eastern College, 2022). Health care professionals play a vital role in child protection, like pediatricians, nurses, psychologists and other medical professionals who take care of children because they are trained to recognize signs of abuse, neglect and exploitation. They are able to observe these signs during routine check-ups or medical visits. They are ethically obligated to report concerns about a child's well-being to the appropriate authorities.

1.4.3 Social Workers

Ghani (2025) stated that a social worker helps individuals, families, and communities access valuable resources to improve their health and well-being, depending on their area of specialty. Social workers are other key stakeholders in child protection efforts. These professionals work directly with families who are involved with child protection services. They conduct assessments, develop safety plans, provide counseling services and connect families with community resources that can help address underlying issues contributing to the problem (e.g. child welfare).

1.4.4 Law Enforcement Agencies

A law enforcement agency is defined as a public organization responsible for maintaining law and order, investigating crimes, and prosecuting offenders with the assistance of public police and prosecutors (Agbonika, 2014). Law enforcement officers investigate allegations of abuse, neglect or exploitation and work closely with child protection officers to ensure children's safety.

Generally, everybody is a stakeholder when it comes to child protection. There are also other agencies associated with child protection, like NAPTIP (National Agency for the Prohibition of Trafficking in Persons), which is under the Federal Ministry of Humanitarian Affairs, Disaster Management and Social Development.

2. The Child Rights Act and Protection of Children

The UN convention On the Right of the Child states “*parties shall take all appropriate, legislative, social and educational measures to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parents, legal guidance’s or any other person who has the care of the child*” (Agbonika, 2014).

Section 277 of the Child Right Act 2003, describes a child as a person under 18 years of age, while section 1 and 2 of the Act states that “*Best interest of a child to be of paramount consideration in all actions*” and “*A child to be given protection and care necessary for his or her wellbeing*”.

The act is a major part of the Nigerian social protection policy regarding children. It ensures the rights of all children in Nigeria and recognizes that violence in any form against children is not in any way or circumstance justifiable because all forms of violence against children are preventable.

Aside the provisions of the Child Rights Act (2003), child protection policy is also contained in various national and international laws and treaties such as the Convention of the Rights of the Child 1989, African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child 1990, The Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography 2000, the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflicts, The National Priority Agenda for protection of Vulnerable Children in Nigeria 2013-2020. As signatories to these Conventions, the Nigerian government is obligated to guarantee that all children within its geographical boundaries are safe and protected from neglect, abuse and violence. Also, the Violence Against Persons Prohibition (VAPP) Act also provides for sanctions against offenders.

3. Statement of Problem

Despite the steps taken by the government and non-governmental organizations to protect the child, the incidence of child abuse continues to rise. Violence against children is a violation of the Child Rights Act and other Conventions governing the rights of a child. The consequences of prolonged physical and emotional abuse on a child's cognitive development threaten the proper mental and physical development and, in some cases, the survival of the child (Agbonika, 2014).

Children are frequently exposed to various forms of violence, exploitation and abuse (Osanyin, 2002). Most of these abuses and exploitations come from people trusted either by the child or parents or guardians. People whose children trust are not expected to harm them while under their care. Thus, the majority of children who live in very difficult conditions run the risk of constant domestic abuse, with such abuses coming from biological parents, siblings and guardians. Other forms of child abuse are child labor, child marriages, child trafficking and female genital mutilation (FGN, 2023). This study, therefore, seeks to identify the challenges in prioritizing the best interests of the child in child protection.

3.1 Purpose of the Study

Specifically, the study seeks to:

- 1) Identify challenges in prioritizing the best interest of the child in child protection in Nigeria.
- 2) Identify key considerations in child protection in Nigeria.

3.2 Research Questions

In line with the specific purposes, the study posed the following research questions:

- 1) What are the perceived challenges in prioritizing the best interest of the child in child protection in Nigeria?
- 2) What are the key considerations in Child Protection in Nigeria?

3.3 Research Hypotheses

Ho₁: There are no perceived challenges in prioritizing the best interest of the child in child protection in Nigeria.

Ho₂: There are no key considerations in child protection in Nigeria.

4. Method

The study adopted the descriptive survey research design because it involved the collection of information on challenges in prioritizing the best interest of the child in child protection.

The population of the study consisted of respondents selected from three (3) states in the three geopolitical zones in Nigeria, Delta in the South-South Geopolitical zone, Lagos State (South West) and Kogi State representing North Central. A sample of 1,120 respondents, which comprised all stakeholders in child protection (parents, educators, health workers, social workers and law enforcement agencies), was drawn from the total population.

4.1 Assessment and Measures

A two-sectioned self-structured questionnaire titled (CPBICQ) "Challenges in prioritizing the Best Interest of the Child Questionnaire" was designed by the researchers for the study. The researchers carried out the administration of the research instrument and three trained assistants who visited the different states and three public schools each in each of the states to solicit for responses from teachers and parents, two pediatric hospitals in each of the states were visited to get responses from health workers, questionnaires were also distributed to law enforcement agencies and some workers in correctional centers in each state.

A total of 1,120 questionnaires were retrieved, and the data collected were collated and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). This was used to compute the mean and standard deviation.

4.2 Ethical Consideration

The respondents were assured of their responses would be confidential.

4.3 Presentation of Results

Research Question 1: What are the perceived challenges in prioritizing the best interest of the child in child protection in Nigeria?

Table 1: Statistical Analysis on Perceived Challenges in Prioritizing the Best Interest of the Child in Child protection in Nigeria

S/N	Challenges	N	\bar{x}	SD	Decision
1	Cultural practices may harm children’s well-being.	1120	3.4955	.51081	Agree
2	There are limited resources for child protection services	1120	3.5214	.51387	Agree
3	There is lack of accountability in child protection systems	1120	3.5000	.50022	Agree
4	There is insufficient training for child protection professionals	1120	3.5286	.52044	Agree
5	Socio-economic factors affect child protection in Nigeria	1120	3.6429	.47937	Agree
6	There is limited access to child protection services	1120	3.4938	.51428	Agree
7	Insecurity affects children’s lives	1120	3.5196	.51741	Agree
8	There is discrimination against vulnerable children	1120	3.4982	.50378	Agree
9	There is limited community participation in child protection efforts	1120	3.5250	.53082	Agree
10	There are inadequate legal frameworks for child protection.	1120	3.6384	.48806	Agree
	Total	1120			

Note: Benchmark = 2.50

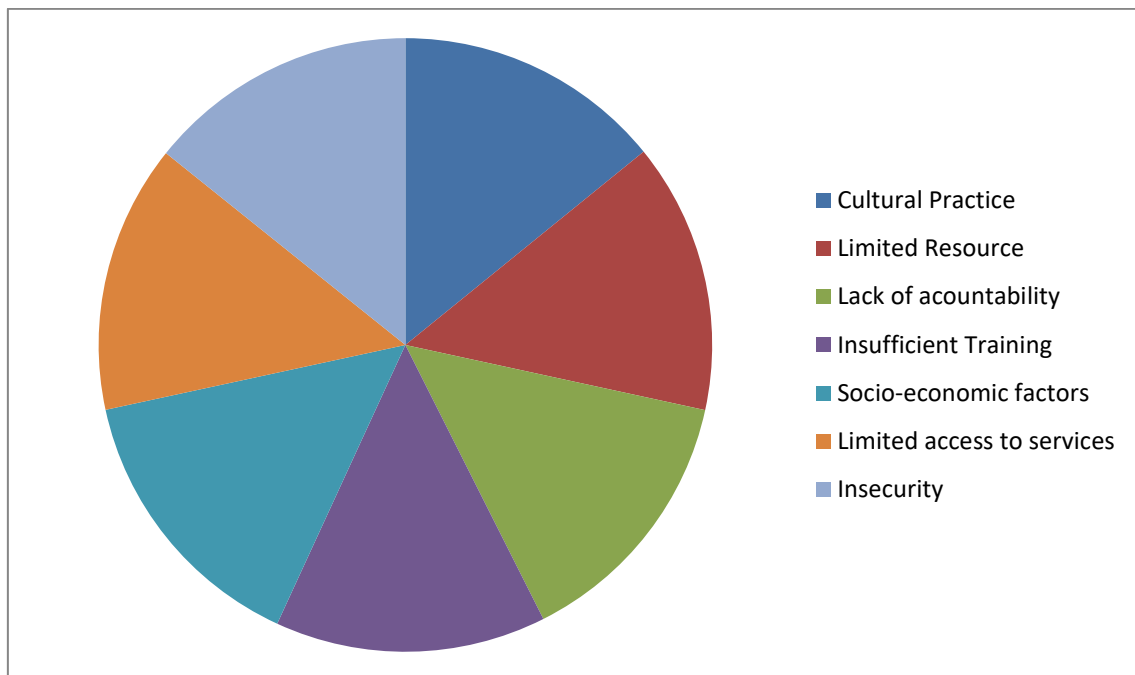


Figure 1: Mean Values for Challenges in Prioritizing the Best Interest of the Child

Table 1 shows that all 10 items had mean scores of 2.50 and above ($\bar{x} \geq 2.50$). Meaning all ten challenges affected prioritizing the best interest of the child in child protection in Nigeria. It is also indicated in the pie chart (Figure 1) above.

Research Question 2: What are the key considerations in Child Protection in Nigeria?

Table 2: Statistical Analysis of Key Considerations in Child Protection in Nigeria

S/N	Key Considerations in Child Protection	N	\bar{x}	SD	Decision
1	Safety	1120	3.6402	.50200	Agree
2	Involving the child in decisions affecting their lives	1120	3.6563	.47517	Agree
3	Responding to abuse, exploitation, and neglect	1120	3.6241	.50445	Agree
4	Reuniting the child with their family whenever possible	1120	3.6786	.48598	Agree
5	Respecting the child's cultural/religious background	1120	3.9116	.31389	Agree
6	Ensuring access to essential services	1120	3.6625	.52330	Agree
7	Protecting the child from discrimination based on gender, disability or other factors	1120	3.6848	.47619	Agree
	Total	1120			

Note: Benchmark = 2.50

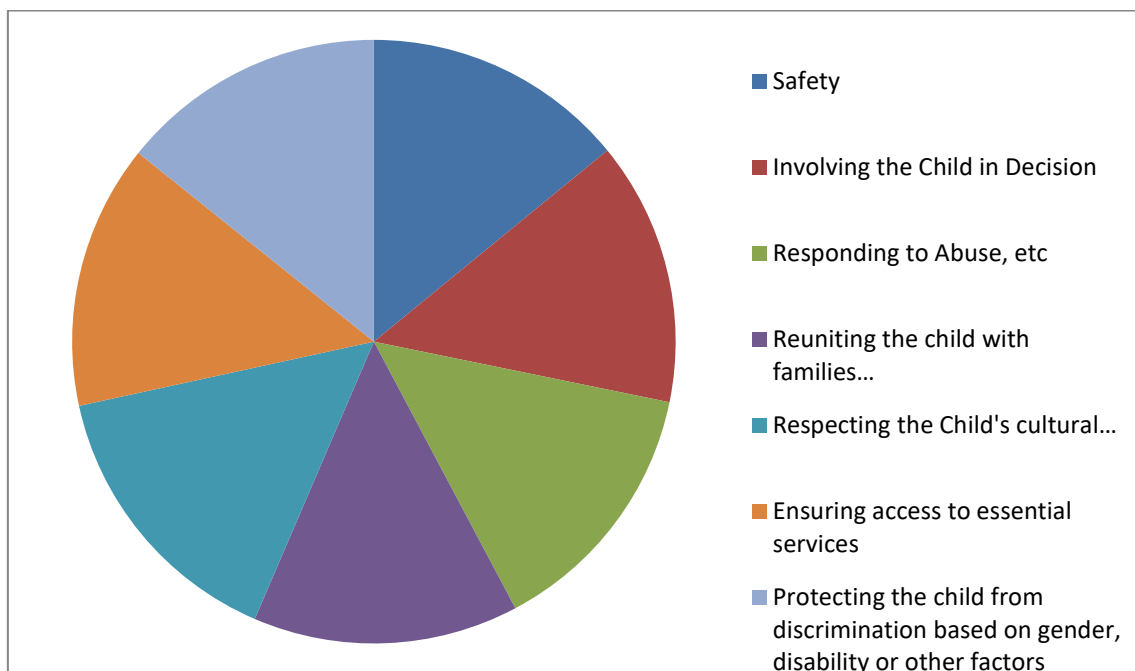


Figure 2: Key Considerations in Child Protection

Table 2 shows that all seven items had mean scores of 2.50 and above ($\bar{x} \geq 2.50$). Meaning all key considerations in child protection were very important and will help in prioritization of the best interest of the child in Nigeria. It is well educated in the pie chart.

4.4 Test of Hypotheses

H₀: There are no perceived challenges in prioritizing the child's best interest in child protection in Nigeria.

Table 3: One-sample T-test

	N	\bar{x}	SD	SD. Error \bar{x}
Total challenges	1120	35.36	4.81	0.14

Table 3: One-sample T-test

	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Total challenges	246.10	1119	0.00	35.36	35.08	35.64

Table 3 presents a one-sample t-test that shows non-significant evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

Ho: There are no key considerations in Child protection in Nigeria.

Table 4: One-sample T-test

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean		
Total factors	1120	25.86	2.91	0.09		
	Test Value = 0					
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Total factors	296.59	1119	0.00	25.86	25.69	26.03

Table 4 also presents a one-sample t-test that shows non-significant evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

5. Discussion of Findings

The study has revealed that different cultural and traditional practices may harm the well-being of the child; there are limited resources and infrastructure for child protection services. Corruption, lack of accountability, coupled with insufficient training and capacity building for child protection professionals, as asserted in Illodibe and Chemerie (2020) study, which concluded that addressing these challenges will require a multi-faceted approach involving government, civil society, communities and international partners who are stakeholders in children's matters.

The study has also revealed that key considerations for the best interest of the child include safety and well-being of the children, that is, ensuring their physical, emotional and psychological safety (Illiodibe & Chemerie, 2020). Involving the child in decisions affecting his life, respecting the child's cultural and religious background, ensuring access to education, healthcare, protecting the child from discrimination based on gender, disability or other factors, among others, are the key considerations in child protection (Atakpo, 2020).

6. Conclusion and Recommendations

In conclusion, the best interest of the child is a critical principle in child protection in Nigeria. Despite the challenges, it is essential to ensure that the rights and well-being of children are protected and promoted. Nigeria can ensure that children grow and develop in a safe, supportive, and nurturing environment, reaching their full potential and contributing to the country's development. To achieve this, it is therefore recommended that there must be:

- 1) Strong political will and commitment to child protection.
- 2) Increased investment in child protection services and infrastructure.
- 3) Capacity building and training for child protection professionals.
- 4) Community engagement and participation in child protection efforts.
- 5) Effective policy and legal frameworks for child protection.
- 6) Data-driven decision making to inform child protection interventions.
- 7) Collaboration and coordination among child protection stakeholders.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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