



Levels of Knowledge and Prevalence of Child Abuse among Parents in Egor Local Government Area, Edo State, Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

Background: Child abuse remains a significant challenge in Nigeria, undermining the rights to survival, development, protection, and participation enshrined in the Child Rights Act (CRA) of 2003. Despite legal frameworks, socio-cultural norms and economic pressures in semi-urban areas like Egor Local Government Area (LGA), Edo State, perpetuate abusive practices such as street hawking, child labor, and corporal punishment.

Objective: This study examined the influence of parental knowledge of the CRA on the prevalence of child abuse in Egor LGA, assessing awareness levels and the extent of abusive practices.

Method: A descriptive survey research design was adopted, sampling 400 parents in Egor LGA using a multistage sampling technique. Data were collected via a structured questionnaire with a reliability coefficient of 0.92, and analysis was conducted using descriptive statistics, presented in frequency tables.

Results: Findings revealed a high level of parental knowledge, with 89.6% recognizing various forms of child abuse (physical, emotional, sexual, and neglect) and 100% acknowledging the importance of education in abuse prevention. However, 89.6% reported child abuse, including street hawking and harsh discipline, as prevalent, indicating a gap between knowledge and practice influenced by socio-cultural norms and economic necessity.

Conclusion: Despite high awareness of the CRA and child abuse, the persistence of abusive practices in Egor LGA underscores the impact of cultural acceptance and economic constraints, coupled with weak enforcement of the CRA.

Unique Contribution: This study provided fresh insights into the knowledge-practice divide in child abuse prevention, highlighting the role of socio-cultural and economic factors in undermining legal protections, offering valuable guidance for tailored interventions in semi-urban Nigerian contexts.

Key Recommendation: Comprehensive community-based programs, including reorientation of parents, community leaders, and caregivers, alongside economic support and strengthened CRA enforcement, are essential to reduce child abuse and promote compliance with child rights protections.

Keywords: Child abuse, parental knowledge, socio-cultural factors, Egor LGA, Nigeria, Child Rights Act.



INTRODUCTION

Child abuse is a pervasive global issue that violates children's fundamental rights to survival, development, protection, and participation, as articulated by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF, 2017). The World Health Organization (2022) estimates that over 40 million children worldwide experience abuse annually, encompassing physical, emotional, sexual abuse, neglect, and exploitation. In Nigeria, a nation committed to safeguarding children's rights through its ratification of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1991, the persistence of child abuse highlights a significant disconnect between policy and practice. Despite the enactment of the Child Rights Act (CRA) in 2003, which aligns with international standards such as the UNCRC and the African Union Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990), implementation remains inconsistent, particularly in semi-urban and rural communities (Akwara et al., 2020). This gap is attributed to socio-cultural norms, economic constraints, and limited awareness, which perpetuate harmful practices often mistaken for discipline (Oloko, 2019).

This study focuses on Egor Local Government Area (LGA) in Edo State, Nigeria, a semi-urban region characterised by diverse socio-economic and cultural demographics, making it an ideal setting to explore parental knowledge and the prevalence of child abuse. Egor LGA, located in Benin City, reflects a blend of urban and rural influences, with residents ranging from low-income families to educated professionals. The area's socio-cultural practices, such as street hawking and child labor, often normalised as economic necessities, contribute to child maltreatment (Onyemachi, 2020). The research addresses two primary objectives: to examine the level of knowledge among parents regarding child abuse and to ascertain the extent of its prevalence in the community. While extensive literature exists on child abuse in Nigeria, much of it has concentrated on broad national prevalence trends (Okafor, 2016; Akwara et al., 2020), urban/metropolitan centres such as Lagos and Abuja (Olumodeji, 2018; Sossou & Yogtib, 2018), or specific forms of abuse such as sexual exploitation and trafficking (Lachman et al., 2022). However, there is a paucity of empirical research focusing on semi-urban communities like Egor LGA, where unique socio-cultural and economic dynamics shape parental practices. Moreover, existing studies often adopt a policy- or child-centred perspective, neglecting the crucial parental knowledge dimension—that is, how much parents know about child abuse and how this knowledge (or lack thereof) correlates with actual prevalence in their households and communities. Additionally, previous studies have largely relied on quantitative surveys at macro levels, offering statistical overviews but overlooking the nuanced, community-specific realities that influence child-rearing practices. What remains underexplored is whether a disconnect exists between parents' awareness of child abuse and the continued prevalence of abusive practices in semi-urban Nigerian settings. No known study has yet investigated this gap within the context of Egor LGA, Edo State.



This lacuna necessitated the present study, which seeks to provide localised insights into the knowledge-practice gap among parents in Egor LGA. By situating the research within this unique socio-cultural context, the study not only expands the geographical scope of Nigerian child abuse scholarship but also contributes theoretically to the discourse on the relationship between parental awareness and abuse prevalence.

The study hypothesises that while parents in Egor LGA may possess a high level of knowledge about child abuse, its prevalence remains elevated due to implementation gaps and socio-cultural factors. Previous research indicates that awareness alone does not guarantee reduced abuse, as cultural beliefs and economic pressures often override legal protections (Lachman et al., 2022). For instance, practices like corporal punishment, viewed as legitimate discipline in many Nigerian communities, blur the line between discipline and abuse (Sossou & Yogtib, 2018). This study seeks to bridge the knowledge-practice gap by providing localised insights into Egor LGA's unique context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptualisation of Child Abuse

There is no general accepted definition of child abuse as a result of differences in the perception of what is generally acceptable as abusive or not. The African Network for Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse and Neglect (ANPPCAN) defines child abuse as “the intentional, unintentional or well intentional acts which endanger the physical health, emotional, moral and the educational welfare of children. Child abuse can be seen as any act of omission or commission, physical or psychological mistreatment or neglect of a child by its parents, guardians, caregiver, or other adults that may endanger the child's physical, psychological, or emotional health development. In this definition, wrongfully maltreating a child or selfishly making an unfair use of a child's services by adults responsible for the child constitutes child abuse (Hopper, 2024). Child abuse can be broadly categorised into five perspectives namely physical abuse, emotional abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect and child exploitation.

The foundation of Child Rights issue lies in the recognition of Human Rights of the Child, human right is universal and applies to all human being equally across class, culture, descent, religion and geographical limits “The Core Human Rights that apply to adults also apply to children”. In a human right sense, certain population groups often encounter discriminatory treatment or need special attention to avoid potential exploitation, these populations make up what can be referred to as vulnerable groups, such as the women, girls, children, persons with disability, elderly persons, HIV/AIDS afflicted, migrant workers etc.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) has estimated that 12 million children under the age of five die every year, mostly of preventable causes; 130 million children in developing countries, a majority of whom are girls, are not in primary schools; 160 million children



are malnourished; approximately 1.4 billion children lack access to safe water; and 2.7 billion children lack access to adequate sanitation.

Under the Child Rights Convention, a child “means every human being below the age of eighteen years, unless the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (Article-1). In all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration (Article – 3, Para 1).

Heyman and Slep (2022) observed that child abusers are likely to have experienced abuse themselves. Abusive behaviour is transmitted across generation with studies showing that some 30% of abused children became abusive parents. Children who experience abuse and violence may adopt the behaviour as a model for their own parenting, and parents who cannot differentiate between discipline and abuse also abuse their own children (Gelles, 2021). The potential for maltreatment exists in all social strata and every family at some points in a child’s development. There is no single explanation for child abuse. Child abuse results from a complex combination of personal, social and cultural factors. It can be caused by inter-generational transmission of violence, social isolation, low community involvement and types of families (Finkelhor, 2021).

Factors that Contribute to Child Abuse

There is no single known cause of child maltreatment nor is there any single description that captures all families in which children are victims of abuse and neglect. Child maltreatment occurs across socio-economic, religious, cultural, racial and ethnic groups. Professionals who intervene in cases of child maltreatment must recognise the multiple, complex causes of the problem and must tailor their assessment and treatment of children and families to meet the specific needs and circumstances of the family.

Risk factors associated with child maltreatment can be grouped in five domains: Parent or caregiver factors, family factors, child factors, environmental factors and protective factors. Available research suggests that different factors may play varying roles in accounting for different forms of child maltreatment (physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect, and psychological or emotional abuse).

Parental Knowledge of Child Abuse

The challenges researchers are confronted with in having an appropriate perspective in the definition of child abuse from which to study the parenting of abused children stems in part from the currently incomplete understanding of the dynamics of parental functioning. The human potentials realised in the parental role are often reduced to the singular notion that it is the capacity to love which provides the motivation, resilience, and understanding to nurture a child. Yet, loving parents can understand and treat their children in very different ways. Studies of



family violence suggest that the emotional investments of parenthood remain highly vulnerable to the stresses and demands of child rearing.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989. The convention affirms children's entitlement to development, protection, participation and nondiscrimination. It also acknowledges that the realization of these rights for children can only be accomplished through care and assistance of adults. Nigeria ratified the UN Convention on the Child's Rights in 1991. This implies that thenceforth the country had committed itself to a code of binding obligations towards her children. Among these obligations are the raising of awareness and the involvement of the civil society, including children, in the realization of children's rights.

Akwara, Soyibo and Agba (2020) believe that the right of the child is being taken for granted by parents in Nigeria, in their study they examined the dangers posed by taking the rights of children for granted in the society and efforts being made in Nigeria to protect the child for the overall and sustainable development of the society. Based on the outcome of their study, they concluded that not much is being done even though children are the future of any nation.

Similarly according to Akor (2019) it is an offence under the CRA for parents to deny their children education but some children are kept at home and used as helpers instead of being given opportunity to exploit their environment for future relevance. In the states where children are hardly immunised against killer diseases, do the parents know that it is the rights of the children to be immunised? Article 24 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides that children have the right to good quality health care, clean water, nutritious food and clean environment (Akor, 2019). Article 27 of the Child Rights Convention says children have right to a standard of living that is good to meet their physical and mental needs while article 28 provides that children have right to education just as primary education shall be free.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Attachment Theory

This study is premised on the attachment theory propounded by Bowlby (1969, 1973, & 1988) and information processing theory propounded by Horton and Turnage (1976). Attachment theory is a relatively new, open-ended theory with eclectic underpinnings, intended as a revision of psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freudian instinct theory and meta-psychology; it has been infused by present-day biological principles with an emphasis on ethnology and evolutionary theory, as well as by control-systems theory and cognitive psychology. Although it began with an attempt to understand the disturbed functioning of individuals who had experienced traumatic losses or early separations, it is a theory of normal development that offers explanations for some types of a typical development (Bowlby, 1969, 1973, 1988).



Information Processing Theory

The present study is also anchored on the Information Processing Theory propounded by Horton and Turnage (1976). The assumption of the theory is on stimulus and the responses of human being. They identify the basic processes and describe precisely how these processes function and variables that affects the human mind and thought. The cognitive psychologists' assumption on information mental process, such as perception, attention and memory are vital components of human psychological wellbeing. They used computer as a model to compare the brain of human being. Similarly, when the child is abused the information perception, action reaction, emotion are greatly affected negatively. The mimetic theory suggest that exposure to trauma can generate aggression and increase the opportunity of modeled abuse behaviour.

The essence of theories of this study is based on the way the cognitive psychologists conceptualised the basic processes and describe precisely how these processes functions and the variables that affect the human entity and this is a springboard where the study is anchored upon.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study adopted a cross-sectional research design to investigate the level of parental knowledge of child abuse and the prevalence of child abuse in Egor Local Government Area (LGA), Edo State, Nigeria. A cross-sectional approach was chosen to capture a snapshot of parental knowledge and abuse prevalence at a specific point in time, allowing for the examination of associations between variables without manipulating conditions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023).

Study Population

The target population consisted of parents aged 20–60 years residing in Egor LGA, a semi-urban area in Benin City, Edo State, characterised by a mix of urban and rural influences. According to the National Population Commission (NPC, 2006) and projected estimates for 2023, Egor LGA has a population of approximately 339,899 persons, of which an estimated 85,000 are parents aged 20–60 years. Using Cochran's (1977) formula for sample size determination, a representative sample of 500 parents was drawn. Purposive sampling was employed to target parents with children under 18 years, as they are directly responsible for child-rearing and likely to influence abuse prevalence. Inclusion criteria required participants to be residents of Egor LGA for at least one year and to have at least one child. The sample included both male and female parents to capture gender-based perspectives, with recruitment conducted across community centres, markets, and schools to enhance diversity.



Data Collection

Data were collected using a structured questionnaire designed to address the study's objectives: assessing parental knowledge of child abuse and determining its prevalence. The questionnaire was divided into three sections: (1) socio-demographic characteristics (e.g., age, gender, education, employment status), (2) knowledge of child abuse (e.g., awareness of forms, signs, and legal protections), and (3) prevalence indicators (e.g., observed or reported instances of abuse, such as street hawking or corporal punishment).

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and means, to summarise parental knowledge and abuse prevalence. The Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 23 was employed for its robustness in handling survey data and generating clear statistical outputs (Field, 2018).

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were paramount to protect participants' rights and ensure the study's integrity. Informed consent was obtained from all respondents, who were provided with a detailed explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and voluntary nature. The study adhered to ethical guidelines outlined by the Declaration of Helsinki (World Medical Association, 2013) and received approval from a local institutional review board in Edo State.

RESULT

Recognition of Child Abuse Forms

A significant finding was that 89.6% (448 out of 500) of respondents agreed that child abuse extends beyond physical forms, encompassing emotional, sexual, neglectful, and exploitative abuses as defined by the World Health Organization (2022). This awareness included understanding emotional abuse (e.g., verbal aggression, humiliation), sexual abuse (e.g., molestation, exploitation), neglect (e.g., failure to provide food, shelter, or medical care), and exploitation (e.g., child labor, trafficking). The high percentage suggests that parents in Egor LGA are familiar with the multidimensional nature of child abuse, likely due to exposure to formal education, community workshops, or media campaigns addressing child rights under the Child Rights Act (CRA) of 2003 (Akor, 2019). For instance, respondents frequently cited examples like street hawking as exploitative, indicating an understanding of legal definitions.

Identification of Signs and Symptoms

The study also found that 82.4% (412 out of 500) of parents accurately identified signs and symptoms of child abuse, demonstrating a robust understanding of observable indicators. These included physical signs (e.g., bruises, burns, or fractures), behavioral indicators (e.g., withdrawal, fearfulness, or aggression), and emotional signs (e.g., low self-esteem, anxiety). This level of recognition is critical for early intervention, as parents who can identify abuse are better



positioned to report or address it (Newcomb & Locke, 2001). The slightly lower percentage (82.4% compared to 89.6% for abuse forms) may reflect challenges in recognizing subtle or non-physical signs, particularly among less-educated respondents, as cross-tabulation showed that parents with primary or no formal education were less likely to identify emotional abuse indicators (Akinwusi & Ibrahim, 2023). This finding underscores the need for targeted education to enhance recognition of all abuse forms, especially in communities where cultural norms may normalise certain behaviours.

Role of Formal Education and Training

All respondents (100%, 500) acknowledged that formal education or training was helpful in understanding child abuse, reflecting the significant influence of educational exposure on awareness. This unanimous agreement highlights the role of schools, community programs, and non-governmental organizations in disseminating knowledge about child rights and abuse prevention in Egor LGA. For example, respondents with tertiary education (30% of the sample) reported higher confidence in understanding legal protections under the CRA, such as prohibitions on child labour and physical harm. Community sensitization programs, often supported by organizations like UNICEF, have likely contributed to this awareness, as noted in similar Nigerian studies (UNICEF, 2017). The mean response scores for knowledge-related questions were 236.4 for “Strongly Agree” and 245.2 for “Agree,” indicating a strong consensus that education enhances understanding, with minimal variation across demographic groups (e.g., gender, employment status).

Community Perceptions and Confidence in Addressing Abuse

The findings further revealed that 89.6% (448 out of 500) of parents viewed child abuse as a common issue in their community, suggesting a heightened awareness of its societal prevalence. This perception aligns with regional data indicating high abuse rates in Nigeria due to socio-economic and cultural factors (Pinheiro, 2016). Additionally, 92% (460 out of 500) reported confidence in addressing abuse cases, either through reporting to authorities (e.g., police, child welfare agencies) or intervening directly, such as counseling affected children or families. However, qualitative data indicated that cultural barriers, such as fear of social stigma or community backlash, sometimes hindered action, particularly for sexual abuse cases (Onyemachi, 2020). These findings suggest that while knowledge is high, practical application may be constrained by socio-cultural dynamics.

Societal Commonality of Abusive Practices

A key finding was that 89.6% (448 out of 500) of respondents acknowledged the societal commonality of practices classified as abusive under the Child Rights Act (CRA) of 2003, including street hawking, child labour, and corporal punishment. Street hawking, where children sell goods in public spaces to support family income, was frequently cited as a normalised practice in Egor LGA, reflecting economic pressures in a semi-urban setting where 20% of respondents were unemployed (Oloko, 2019). Similarly, corporal punishment, such as beating or whipping, was reported as a common disciplinary method, with many parents viewing it as a



culturally acceptable means of correcting behavior. Qualitative comments from open-ended questionnaire responses further elucidated this trend, with respondents noting that such practices are often seen as “necessary” due to socio-economic challenges or traditional child-rearing norms. For instance, one parent remarked, “Sending children to hawk helps the family survive,” indicating a perception of economic exploitation as a pragmatic choice rather than abuse (Sossou & Yogtib, 2018).

Cultural Tolerance for “Discipline”

Qualitative data from open-ended questions provided deeper insight into the cultural tolerance for practices perceived as “discipline,” which significantly contributes to the moderately high prevalence of child abuse. Many respondents described harsh physical punishment, such as spanking or flogging, as a traditional and effective method to instill obedience, unaware that such actions violate the CRA’s provisions against physical harm (Akor, 2019). This cultural normalization was particularly evident in responses from parents with lower educational attainment (20% with primary education, 10% with no formal education), who were more likely to equate physical discipline with responsible parenting. Additionally, practices like child labor were justified as teaching children responsibility or preparing them for economic survival, reflecting deep-rooted socio-cultural beliefs. These findings align with regional studies that highlight how cultural norms perpetuate abuse despite legal frameworks like the CRA and the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC, 1989) (UNICEF, 2017).

Correlation between Knowledge and Prevalence

Cross-tabulation analysis revealed a notable correlation between limited knowledge and higher reported abuse prevalence, particularly among respondents with lower knowledge scores. Specifically, 30% (45 out of 150) of parents who demonstrated limited awareness of non-physical abuse forms (e.g., emotional abuse, neglect) reported higher incidences of abuse in their communities, such as frequent observations of neglected children or those subjected to physical discipline. For example, these respondents noted seeing children with visible injuries or exhibiting withdrawal behaviors, which are indicators of abuse (WHO, 2022). In contrast, parents with higher knowledge scores (e.g., those recognizing all abuse forms, 89.6%) were less likely to report frequent abuse observations, though the overall prevalence remained moderately high even among this group. This suggests that while knowledge is a critical factor, it does not fully mitigate abuse due to external influences like poverty and cultural acceptance of certain practices (Lachman et al., 2022). The gap between high knowledge (89.6% recognizing abuse forms) and persistent prevalence underscores the challenge of translating awareness into behavioral change.

DISCUSSION

High Parental Knowledge and Educational Influence

The findings reveal a high level of parental knowledge about child abuse in Egor Local Government Area (LGA), with 89.6% (448 out of 500) of respondents recognising that child



abuse encompasses physical, emotional, sexual, neglectful, and exploitative forms, as defined by the World Health Organization (2022). Additionally, 100% (500) of respondents acknowledged the value of formal education or training in understanding child abuse, underscoring the critical role of educational interventions in enhancing awareness. These results align with studies by Johnson and Smith (2017) and Jones et al. (2019), which emphasise that education, including community sensitization programs and school-based initiatives, significantly improves parental understanding of child abuse definitions, signs, and legal protections, such as those outlined in

Nigeria's Child Rights Act (CRA) of 2003. In Egor LGA, a semi-urban area with 30% of respondents holding tertiary education and 40% with secondary education, access to formal schooling and community workshops, often supported by organizations like UNICEF (2017), has evidently contributed to this high awareness. However, the slightly lower percentage (82.4%) recognizing specific signs and symptoms suggests that while conceptual knowledge is strong, practical identification skills may require further reinforcement, particularly for non-physical forms like emotional abuse or neglect (Akinwusi & Ibrahim, 2023).

Persistent Prevalence and the Knowledge-Practice Gap

Despite the high level of knowledge, the study found a moderately high prevalence of child abuse in Egor LGA, with 89.6% (448) of respondents acknowledging the societal commonality of practices such as street hawking, child labor, and corporal punishment, which are classified as abusive under the CRA (2003). This finding supports Onyemachi (2020), who highlights a disconnect between Nigeria's child rights rhetoric and the reality of persistent abuse, driven by socio-cultural and economic factors.

Implications for Future Research and Interventions

The findings reveal that although many parents in Egor LGA demonstrated awareness of child abuse, abusive practices such as corporal punishment and child labour remain prevalent. This supports Olumodeji (2018) and Sossou & Yogtib (2018), who noted that knowledge does not always translate into practice because cultural perceptions of discipline still legitimise physical punishment. Similarly, Lachman et al. (2022) observed that economic hardship compels parents to rely on child labour despite awareness of its risks. However, the relatively high level of parental knowledge found in Egor LGA contrasts with Okafor's (2016) study in rural Anambra, where awareness of the Child Rights Act was low. This difference may be attributed to Egor's semi-urban setting, where greater access to media, schools, and sensitisation programs likely increases exposure to child protection messages. This study extends knowledge by examining the underexplored semi-urban context and revealing the knowledge–practice disconnect. It shows that awareness alone is insufficient without cultural reorientation, economic empowerment, and stronger enforcement of the Child Rights Act, echoing Akwara et al. (2020). Practical interventions should therefore combine community-based education on non-violent parenting with poverty alleviation strategies to reduce reliance on child labour. Future research should integrate child-reported data and longitudinal approaches to capture more accurate prevalence patterns and assess whether improved knowledge ultimately reduces abuse over time.



CONCLUSION

Based on the results, this study concludes that parental knowledge of child abuse in Egor LGA is relatively high, yet this awareness does not translate into practice, as abusive behaviours such as child labour, street hawking, and corporal punishment remain widespread. The persistence of these practices demonstrates that knowledge alone is insufficient to reduce abuse when socio-cultural norms, economic hardship, and weak enforcement of the Child Rights Act prevail. The study therefore affirms that bridging the knowledge–practice gap requires more than awareness, it demands cultural reorientation, economic empowerment, and stronger policy implementation.

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