

Interrogating the Impacts of Child Abuse on National Development in Nigeria

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the impact of child abuse on national development in Nigeria, focusing on key dimensions such as child labour, school dropouts, and sexual exploitation. Employing the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimation technique, the findings reveal that child abuse significantly undermines human capital formation, reduces productivity, and impedes socio-economic advancement. Conversely, education expenditure and literacy rate exert a positive and significant effect on national development, underscoring the critical role of investment in education and child welfare. The persistence of child abuse reflects deep-rooted structural and governance failures that violate Nigeria's constitutional commitments and international treaties, including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. The study recommends a holistic national child protection policy framework aligned with the Child's Rights Act (2003) and international conventions. It further advocates for strengthened educational access, economic empowerment of vulnerable households, and robust legal enforcement mechanisms. Awareness campaigns, inter-ministerial collaboration, and specialized family courts are also essential for effective deterrence and justice delivery. However, eradicating child abuse is both a moral and economic necessity for sustainable national development, as safeguarding children's rights ensures the protection and continuity of Nigeria's human and economic capital.

Keywords: Child abuse, Child's Right, National Development, literacy rates

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1. Introduction

Nigeria's pursuit of national development continues to suffer persistent setbacks due to entrenched governance failures, widening socio-economic inequality, and recurrent human rights violations, despite the nation's ratification of several international and regional treaties guaranteeing fundamental freedoms and human dignity. Nigeria remains mired in corruption, poverty, and institutional decay. The political elites continue to live in opulence while the majority of citizens languish in deprivation, an affront to the social justice principles enshrined in section 17(3)(f) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended), and the masses remain the principal victims of maladministration and abuse of power, and in many states, living conditions have worsened due to electoral malpractice, financial crimes, and weak governance structures. The widening

disparity between elite affluence and mass poverty exposes deep-seated leadership failure and ineffective policy implementation, factors that hinder Nigeria's progress toward realising its commitments under the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (adopted 16 December 1966, entered into force 3 January 1976; ratified by Nigeria 29 July 1993).¹

Child abuse stands out as one of the gravest indicators of Nigeria's governance and moral crisis, directly violating the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted 20 November 1989, entered into force 2 September 1990; ratified by Nigeria 19 April 1991; domesticated as the Child's Rights Act, Cap C50 LFN 2010) and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (adopted July 1990, entered into force 29 November 1999; ratified by Nigeria 23 July 2001).² His Royal Majesty, King Dakolo Bubraye, Agada IV, of

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Ekpetiama Kingdom in Bayelsa State, lamented the prevalence of pedophilia and sexual exploitation in oil-producing regions, where young girls aged 10 to 13 are initiated into prostitution due to proximity to oil facilities.³ Such realities violate Nigeria's obligations under the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol), adopted 15 November 2000, entered into force 25 December 2003; ratified by Nigeria 28 June 2001; domesticated as the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, 2015.⁴ Similarly, the 2017 arrest of Bola Anifowose and eight trafficked children en route to Libya through the Niger Republic underscores the disturbing rise of child trafficking despite Nigeria's accession to the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography.³ The persistence of such abuses, often committed by parents, guardians, and caregivers, reflects a moral collapse and failure of social responsibility. As Salama Sajo observes, "It is tragic that caregivers have become violators of the very rights they are meant to protect."⁶

¹ *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, adopted at Nairobi on 27 June 1981. Nigeria signed the Charter on 31 August 1982, ratified it on 22 June 1983, and deposited its instrument of ratification on 22 July 1983. It was domesticated as the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights (Ratification and Enforcement) Act, Cap A9 LFN, 2010.*

² *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, adopted and opened for signature, ratification, and accession by General Assembly Resolution 44/25 of 20 November 1989; entered into force 2 September 1990 in accordance with article 49. Nigeria signed on 26 January 1990, ratified on 19 April 1991, and domesticated it through the Child's Rights Act, Cap C50 LFN, 2010. African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, adopted by the OAU at Addis Ababa, July 1990; entered into force 29 November 1999; ratified by Nigeria 23 July 2001.*

³ *Emem Idio, "What Osinbajo Didn't See in His N'Delta Tour – HRM Bubranye, Bayelsa Monarch," Vanguard, vol. 25, no. 63295 (May 23, 2017): 22–23.*

⁴ *Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (Palermo Protocol), adopted 15 November 2000, entered into force 25 December 2003; ratified by Nigeria 28 June 2001;*

domesticated as the Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, 2015.

⁵ *Bashir Bello, "Immigration Arrests 8 Over Human Trafficking," Vanguard (2017).*

⁶ *Salama Sajo, "Child Abuse and Its Effects on National Development: A Case Study of Maiduguri Metropolis," International Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences Studies 5, no. 9 (2020): 35.*

Nigeria, as a state party to several international and regional human rights instruments, is legally obligated to protect the rights and welfare of children in accordance with global standards such as the Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (2000), the Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000), and the Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984).¹ These treaties, along with Section 17(3)(f) of the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended), mandate the state to ensure that "children, young persons and the aged are protected against exploitation and moral and material neglect."² Despite these commitments, Nigerian children continue to suffer severe abuse, including physical violence, sexual exploitation, emotional neglect, and socio-economic deprivation manifested in child hawking, forced labour, and early marriage.³ Child abuse, a human rights violation and a crime, reflects deeper governance and developmental crises. Successive governments have promised reforms but have failed to translate rhetoric into tangible social protection. President Bola Ahmed Tinubu's administration, despite pledging improved welfare, deepened hardship through subsidy removal without adequate palliatives. Political elites—many of whom contributed to Nigeria's developmental stagnation—now lead opposition coalitions ahead of the 2027 elections. While these manoeuvres reveal political hypocrisy, they also signal a renewed opportunity for accountability. A strong, credible opposition remains essential for ensuring governmental transparency, effective leadership, and genuine national development⁴. Within the context of this paper, a child refers to any person who has not yet attained the age of eighteen years. In the same vein, child abuse, a generic term, means any intentional action or inaction which either exploits or violates a child in any form, however and thereby hinders the overall development of the child. Similarly,

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development involves economic growth, the equitable distribution of resources, the provision of healthcare, education, housing, and other essential services geared towards improving the individual as well as collective quality of life for the people. National development, therefore, refers to the nation-wide, balanced, sustained and sustainable advancement of the economic, political, social, educational, cultural, legal, scientific, religious as well as material well-being of the populace in a given country. It is a holistic provision of a qualitative life for the people in a country. This paper is divided into five parts. Part one is the introduction, which exposes the background of the research. Part two examines the various dimensions of child abuse, while part three discusses the national development trajectory in Nigeria. Part four is the conclusion, while part five is the recommendations arising from the findings made in the research.

¹Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography (2000); Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children (2000); Convention Against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (1984).

²Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (1999, as amended), s. 17(3)(f).

³Theodore C. Okeahialam, "Child Abuse & Neglect," *ELSEVIER*, vol. 8, no. 1 (1984): 69–73; Salama Sajo, "Child Abuse and Its Effects on National Development: A Case Study of Maiduguri Metropolis," *International Journal of Arts Humanities and Social Sciences Studies*, vol. 5, no. 9 (2020): 35.

⁴Ibid.

2. Forms of Child Abuse

Child abuse is variegated. It is any form of violation of the child. It could be criminal in nature or violation of the human right norms of the child, or both. Various forms of child abuse are x-rayed in this section of the research.

2.1 Child Prostitution and Pornography: Child prostitution means the unlawful use of a child in sexual activity for any consideration whatsoever.¹ Similarly, child pornography means representation, by any means, of a child engaged in real or simulated explicit sexual activity, or any representation of the sexual part of a child mainly for sexual purpose.² It is however not child pornography if the representation of the sexual part of a child is done for lawful purposes such as medical, educational, security purposes, etc.³ Prostitution and pornography constitute child abuse on the child. Both impacts negatively on the overall development of the child and could lead to ill-health and avoidable death of the child. Thus, obscene publication is prohibited.⁴ An article is deemed to be obscene if it tends to deprave and corrupt persons who are likely to read, view or hear the matter embodied in it. To deprave or corrupt refers to the effect of the articles on the mind and no sexual activity needs to result.⁵ An 'article' for the purpose of obscene publication means "anything capable of being or likely to be looked at and read or looked at or read and includes any film, or record of a picture or pictures, and any sound records"⁶. It is an offence to distribute obscene article for any purpose and same attracts a paltry fine not exceeding four hundred naira or imprisonment for a term not exceeding three years or both fine and imprisonment⁷. Again, whoever by any means induces any girl under 18 years to go from any place or to do any act with intent that such girl may be forced or induced into illicit intercourse with another person shall be punished with imprisonment which may extent to ten years in addition to fine⁸.

2.2 Sale of Children: Sale of children is a serious and an organized crime.⁹ A serious crime attracts deprivation of liberty for four years on the minimum or more serious penalty. Sale of children means any transaction or act whereby children are transferred by any person or group of persons to another for financial benefit or any other

¹ Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography adopted by the UN General Assembly resolution A/RES/54/263 of 25 May, 2000 and entered into force on 18 January, 2002, art 2 (b). Nigeria signed it on 8 September, 2000

² ibid art 2 (c).

³ Criminal Code Act, s 233F (1).

⁴ Criminal Code Act: s 233C

⁵ DPP v White, 1992 AC 894

⁶ Criminal Code Act: s 233B

⁷ Criminal Code Act: s 233D

⁸ Penal Code Act: s 275

⁹ UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2000: art 2 (a) (b)

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consideration¹⁰. It is imperative to note that the distinction between sale of children and child trafficking lies in the purpose of the act. Exploitation is key purpose of child trafficking unlike sale of children. A buyer of a child may love, care, protect, train and raise the child far more better than the biological parents particularly when the former has been barren and childless yet needs 'a child of her own' in a circumstance less formal adoption. Notwithstanding the degree of care and love to the child, the act remains a child abuse with perpetual identity crisis on the child from generation to generation.

2.3 Use of Children in Drug Trafficking: The Black's Law Dictionary defines drugs as "...substance intended for use in the diagnosis, cure, treatment, or prevention of disease...natural or synthetic substance that alters one's perception or consciousness."¹¹. Specifically, 'narcotic drug' means any of the substances, natural or synthetic in the first schedule of the Single Convention of Narcotic Drug 1961 as amended including the United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances 1989¹². It means addictive drug especially opiate that dulls the senses and induces sleep. It is a drug that is controlled and prohibited by law¹³. Thus, narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances are controlled drugs which are addictive and prone to abuse. There are natural and synthetic substances that alter the perception and consciousness of the user.¹⁴

Illicit trafficking of drugs means "production, manufacture, extraction, preparation, offering, offering for sale, distribution, sale, delivery on any terms whatsoever...transport, importation, or exportation of any narcotic drug or any psychotropic substance contrary to the provisions of the 1961 Convention as amended or the 1971 Convention"¹⁵. Drug trafficking is a global phenomenon which involves the cultivation,

manufacture, distribution and sale of substances subject to drug prohibition law.

Drug use exacts significant toll from children. It alters their perception and consciousness. These lead to ill health, loss of human lives and productive years.¹⁶ The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child obligate state parties to take appropriate measures to protect a child from the use of narcotics and illicit use of psychotropic substances as well as prevent the use of children in the production and trafficking of such substances¹⁷. The Child's Rights Act in particular prohibits the involvement of children in the production, trafficking or use of narcotic drugs and psychotropic substances.¹⁸ The punishment on conviction is life imprisonment. Notwithstanding the stringent punishment, the rate of illicit drug trafficking is huge and alarming.¹⁹ It has become a threat to national development and security.

2.4 Use of Children in Armed Conflict: Armed conflict is as old as humanity just as child soldier is not a recent phenomenon. According to the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia: "Armed Conflict exists whenever there is a resort to armed force between states or protracted armed violence between governmental authorities and organized armed groups or between such groups within a state."²⁰ Armed conflict, whether internal or international causes displacement of many children²¹. Children are both targets and perpetrators of violence and atrocities during armed conflicts as the distinction between combatants and civilians disappears in the battle fields (Machel: 1996). Two categories of children are discernible in armed conflict: child soldiers and civilian children.²² Although there is no legal definition of a child soldier, the Cape Town Principles and Best Practices states that a child

¹⁰ Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Right of the Child on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography, 2000: art 2 (a)

¹¹ Garner, 2009: 571

¹² National Drug Law Enforcement Agency Act, 2010: s 52

¹³ Okewu v FRN (2012) 49 NSCQR 330

¹⁴ Eze, 2010: 283

¹⁵ United Nations Convention Against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances 1988: art 3

¹⁶ UNODC, World Report:2017

¹⁷ African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, 1989: art 28

¹⁸ CRA, 2003:s25

¹⁹ Nwannennaya and Abiodun, 2017: 1

²⁰ ICTY, The Prosecutor v Dusko Tadic: IT-94-1-A, 1995

²¹ Madubuike-Ekwe and Okani: 201

²² J. N. Madubuike-Ekwe, 'The International Legal Standards Adopted to Stop the Participation of Children in Armed Conflict', Annual Survey of International & Comparative Law, Vol. 1, 2005. Available at <http://digitalcommons.law.Ggu.edu/ann/survey/vol.11/is1/3> accessed 2/7/2017

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soldier is “any person under 18 years of age who is part of any kind of regular or irregular armed forces or armed group in any capacity, including but not limited to cooks, porters, messengers and anyone accompanying such groups, other than family members. The definition includes girls recruited for sexual purposes and for forced marriage. It does not therefore, only refers to a child who is carrying or has carried arms.”²³. The Paris Principles define a child associated with armed forces or armed group as any person, whether a boy or a girl below eighteen years who is or has been recruited or used by an armed force or armed group as a fighter, cook, porter, messenger, spy or for sexual purpose. It is not restricted to a child who is taking or has taken a direct part in hostilities²⁴. Civilian children are noncombatant children²⁵.

Military and armed groups from both sides of the divide penetrate civilian populations and recruit children from public places such as schools,²⁶ buses, churches, mosques, markets, villages etc²⁷. The military or armed groups take advantage of the innocence of the children and engage them as spies, messengers.²⁸ This breeds

mutual suspicion and consequently puts child soldiers and civilian children in danger. The UN through its resolutions²⁹ condemns every violation of relevant international law against recruitment and use of children in armed conflicts. It gravely condemns attacks on schools, hospitals and denial of humanitarian access as well as other violations of International law such as international humanitarian law, international human rights law, refugee law and demand that such concerned parties should put measures in place to halt such practices and ensure the protection of children³⁰.

The third Convention has no specific provision on the protection of child soldiers except the general protection accorded to prisoners of war.³¹ In fact, the Geneva Conventions³² contain no explicit provision relating to the protection of child soldiers. The fourth Convention contains provisions for the protection of civilian children in time of armed conflict.³³ Protocol I directly provides for the protection of children as civilian victim in international armed conflicts.³⁴

The four Geneva Conventions apply to armed conflicts of international character.³⁵ However, article 3 which is

²³ UNICEF, Cape Town Principle and Best Practices, adopted at the Symposium on the Prevention of Recruitment of Children into Armed Force and on Demobilization and Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa, Cape Town, South Africa, 1997, p. 10. Available:

<[https://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/Cape_Town_Principle\(1\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/emerg/files/Cape_Town_Principle(1).pdf)> Accessed 23/6/2017

²⁴ The Paris Principles, Principles and Guidelines on children Associated with Forces or Armed Groups, 2007

²⁵ Additional Protocol 1, 1977, article 50 (1)

²⁶ The Boko Haram abduction of Chibok and Dapli girls in Nigeria

²⁷ J Carter, Kid Soldiers War's Most Tragic Victim, USA Today, June 30, 1996 cited in JN Madubiike-Ekwe 'The International Legal Standard Adopted to Stop the Participation of Children in Armed Conflicts,' Annual Survey of International & Comparative Law, vol. 11, Issue 1, 2005.

²⁸ UNICEF, Pattern in Conflict: Civilians are now the Target, <<http://www.unicef.org/graca/patterns.htm>> cited in J. N. Madubiike- Ekwe, *op cit* p. 4

²⁹ J. N. Madubiike- Ekwe *op. cit* p. 4

³⁰ UN Security Council Resolution 2225 (2015) adopted by the Security Council at its 7466th meeting on 18 June 2015

³¹ *Ibid* Articles 3, 4, 5, 6

³² The four Geneva Conventions are: (1) Geneva Convention (I) for the Amelioration of the condition of

the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field. Geneva, 12 August, 1949, effective 21-10-1950. Nigeria ratified it on 20-06-1961. (2) Convention (II) for the Amelioration of the wounded, sick and shipwrecked Members of Armed Forces at Sea. Geneva 12 August 1949 effective 21/10/1950. Nigeria ratified it on 20/06/1961; (3) Convention (III) relative to the treatment of prisoners of War Geneva 12 August 1949 effective 21/10/1950. Nigeria ratified it on 20/06/1961; (4) Convention (IV) relative to the protection of Civilian persons in Time of War. Geneva 12 August 1949 effective 21/10/1950. Nigeria ratified it on 20/06/1961.

³³ Geneva Convention (iv) on civilian 1949; articles (on protection of children in safety zone), 17 (evacuation of children from besieged areas), 23 (children under 15 years as potential beneficiaries of reliefs materials), 24 (protection of orphaned children who are under 15 years), etc.

³⁴ Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflict Protocol (Protocol 1) 8 June, 1977 and entered into force 07/12/1978. Nigeria ratified it on 10/10/1988, article 77

³⁵ The four Geneva Conventions are: 1. Geneva Convention (1) for the Amelioration of the Condition of the Wounded and Sick in Armed Forces in the Field. Geneva, 12 August, 1949, effective 21-10-1950. Nigeria ratified it on 20-06-1960; (2) Convention (11) for the Amelioration of the Wounded, Sick and Shipwrecked

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common to the four Conventions provide minimum humanitarian protection to noncombatants, the sick and wounded³⁶ in armed conflicts that are not of international character. Each High Contracting Party to the Convention that is a party to the armed conflict is bound as a minimum to treat humanely persons who are not taking any active part in the hostilities. Such persons include members of the armed forces who have laid down their arms and those who as a result of sickness, wounds, detention or any other cause have been rendered *hors de combat*.³⁷ In particular, such class of persons shall not be subjected to violence to life and person, cruel treatment and torture, humiliation and degrading treatment³⁸ etc. Hence, the serious issue of child combatants was not addressed. Consequently, two Additional protocols were adopted in 1977 in addition to the existing four Geneva Conventions. Protocol 1 article 77 urges states parties to take all feasible measures to ensure that children less than 15 year old do not take direct part in hostilities and shall not be recruited into the armed forces. And in recruiting children between 15-17 priority should be given to the oldest among them. However, where children less than 15 years take direct part in hostilities and are captured, they are still entitled to special protection whether or not, they are prisoners of war.³⁹

Article 77 has been criticized on many fronts. First, it requires parties to 'take all feasible measures' and not necessarily measures. Feasible measures have been described as a low standard that grants states parties a leeway to undermine the purpose of the protocol.⁴⁰ Second, children are not fully protected against involvement in armed conflict.⁴¹ Children between the age of 16 and 17 may be recruited into the armed forces of states parties. Worst still, they can take direct part in hostilities. Third, the protocol is limited to International Armed Conflict. To permit any level of involvement of

children in armed conflict compromises the principles of the protocol.⁴² Direct and / or indirect participation of children in armed conflict exposes them to attack by the enemy and if captured, may be regarded as spies, saboteurs or illegal combatants and may lose the status of prisoners of war⁴³ under the third Geneva Convention.

Protocol 11 is applicable to internal armed conflict. It defines internal armed conflict as conflict between state armed forces and organized armed groups.⁴⁴ This excludes situations of internal disturbances and tension such as riots, isolated and sporadic acts of violence and other acts of a similar nature.⁴⁵ Article 4 (1) protects all persons who do not take direct part or who have ceased to take part in hostilities, whether or not their liberty has been restricted. Such persons are entitled to respect for their person, honour and religion practices and shall, in all circumstances be treated humanely. Particularly, children are entitled to care and aid and those who have attained the age of fifteen years shall neither be recruited in the armed forces or groups nor allowed to take part in hostilities.⁴⁶

Notwithstanding the prohibition of recruitment of children who have not attained the age of fifteen years in the armed forces or armed groups, if they are recruited and they take direct part in hostilities and are captured, they are still entitled to care and aid.⁴⁷ Further, children with the consent of their parents or guardians are to be removed temporarily from the areas in which hostilities are taking place to safer areas within the country and shall be accompanied by persons who are responsible for their safety and well-being.⁴⁸ The restriction of the protection to children who have not attained fifteen years only is a potent danger to the society and the children constituency in particular. Again the protocol does not apply to states parties that have not ratified it while states parties may

Members of Armed Forces at Sea. Geneva 12 August 1949, effective 21-10-1950. Nigeria ratified it on 20-06-1961; (3) Convention (111) Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War. Geneva 12 August 1949, effective 21-10-1950. Nigeria ratified it on 20-06-1961; (4) Convention (IV)

³⁶ J. N. Madubuike-Ekwe, 'The International Legal Standards adopted to stop the participation of children in Armed Conflicts' *Annual Survey of International and Comparative Law*, vol. 11, issue 1, Article 3, 2005, p. 36

³⁷ *Ibid*

³⁸ Geneva Convention, 1949, article 3 (1) (a) (b) (c) (d) (2)

³⁹ Additional Protocol 1, article 77 (3)

⁴⁰ J. N. Madubuike-Ekwe, *op cit* p. 37

⁴¹ *Ibid*

⁴² *Ibid*

⁴³ Geneva Convention Relative to the Treatment of Prisoners of War of 12 August, 1949, article 4

⁴⁴ Additional Protocol 11, article 1

⁴⁵ *Ibid* article 2

⁴⁶ *Ibid* article 4 (3) (c)

⁴⁷ *Ibid* article 4 (3) (d)

⁴⁸ *Ibid* article 4 (3) (e)

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categorize their conflict as mere internal disturbances and thereby exclude the application of the protocol.⁴⁹

In order to guide against the use of children in armed conflict, the optional protocol to the Convention on the right of the child on the Involvement of children in Armed Conflict was adopted.⁵⁰ The states parties to the Protocol condemn with the gravest concern the recruitment, training and use of children in hostilities by armed groups distinct from the armed forces of states parties to the Protocol, and mindful of the economic, social and political causes of the involvement of children in armed conflicts adopted the Protocol as a legal measure to specifically prevent, suppress and criminalize⁵¹ the recruitment, training and use of children in armed conflict both within and across national borders. Undoubtedly however, armed conflicts have proliferated around the world. Consequently, children are recruited as child soldiers.⁵² The recruitment is being carried out by both state armed forces and non-state armed groups.⁵³ Given the vulnerability of children,⁵⁴ they are susceptible to recruitment through various unwholesome means and subjected to cynical exploitation such as combat roles, sexual exploitation, porters, spies,⁵⁵ etc.

The Protocol requires states parties to ensure that members of their armed forces who have not attained the age of 18 years do not take direct part in hostilities,⁵⁶ and shall not be compulsorily recruited into their armed forces. Implicitly, the Protocol permits states parties to recruit persons who have not attained the age of 18 into the armed forces provided that the recruitment is voluntary. Voluntary recruitment requires that the informed consent of the persons parents or legal guardians must be fully obtained and the person is well informed of the duties involved in such military service.

Additionally, such person shall take direct part in hostilities.⁵⁷ No clear legal distinction exists between direct and indirect participation in hostilities. Direct participation may include active participation in combat, military activities and direct support functions such as scouting, spying, sabotage, acting as decoys, couriers, porters, and cooks, assistants at military checkpoint, forced marriage or use of girls for sexual purposes.⁵⁸

Conscripting or enlisting children under the age of fifteen years into the national armed forces or armed groups or using them to participate actively in hostilities constitute war crime.⁵⁹ This is in line with article 38 (2) of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child which requires states parties to take all feasible measures to ensure that persons who have not attained the age of fifteen years do not take direct part in hostilities. It further mandates states parties to refrain from recruiting any person who has not attained the age of fifteen years into the armed forces.⁶⁰ And while recruiting persons who are fifteen years above but less than eighteen years, priority should be given to oldest.⁶¹

Interestingly, article 1⁶² has raised the minimum age of direct participation in hostilities from 15⁶³ to 18 years, although article 4 (b) of the Additional protocol to the Geneva Convention of 1949, and relating to the Protection of Victims of Non International Armed Conflict (Protocol 11) did not distinguish between direct and indirect participation in hostilities. However, the requirement raise the age for voluntary recruitment of persons into their national armed forces does not apply in respect of schools under the control of the armed forces of the state.⁶⁴ Armed groups distinct from the armed forces of a state are absolutely prohibited from the

⁴⁹ J. N. Madubuike-Ekwe, op. cit. p. 39

⁵⁰ Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child in the involvement of Children in Armed Conflict adopted on 25/5/2000 and effective 12/2/2002. Nigeria signed it on 8/9/2000 and ratified it on 25/9/2012

⁵¹ *Ibid* article 4 (2)

⁵² UNICEF, Guide to the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, New York, 2003, p. 5

⁵³ *Ibid*

⁵⁴ Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015, Section 45

⁵⁵ UNICEF, Guide to the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, *Loc Cit.*

⁵⁶ *Ibid* article 1: African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, Article 22 (2)

⁵⁷ *Ibid* article 1, 2, 3 (3) (a) (b) (c)

⁵⁸ UNICEF, Guide to the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, UNICEF, New York 2003, p. 14

⁵⁹ Rome Statute of International Criminal Court adopted at Rome on 17 July, 1998 and entered into force on 1, July, 2002, article 8 (2) (b) (xxvi) (e) (vii). Nigeria signed it on 1 January, 2000 and ratified it on 27 September, 2001

⁶⁰ UN CRC, article 38 (3)

⁶¹ *Ibid*

⁶² Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, 2002

⁶³ UN CRC, article 38 (2), Protocol Additional to the Geneva Convention of 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of International Armed Conflict (Protocol 1), article 77 (2).

⁶⁴ Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on the involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, article 3 (5)

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recruitment or use of children in hostilities.⁶⁵ Armed Groups are prohibited from compulsory or voluntary recruitment of children for participation in hostilities. States parties are mandated to take necessary and practical measures to prohibit and criminalize such activity.⁶⁶ The provision affirms the conventional standard that non state armed groups do not have the legal capacity either to be parties to treaties or to maintain armed groups. The regulation of the operation of armed groups is within the legal regime of domestic legislation.⁶⁷ To the extent that states parties may recruit children into their state armed forces though voluntarily, it has been observed that such voluntary recruitment undermines the very essence of the Optional Protocol⁶⁸ as it impacts negatively on the possible broadest protection of children from involvement in armed conflict.

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child provides the broadest possible protection to children in armed conflict. First, states parties are ensure respect for the rules of international humanitarian law applicable in armed conflicts which affect a child.⁶⁹ Second, states parties must take necessary measures to ensure that no child takes direct part in hostilities and in particular refrain from recruiting any child.⁷⁰ The Charter prohibits compulsory and voluntary recruitment of children into the states parties armed forces as well as armed groups. The is unlike the UN Convention on the child on the Rights of the Child⁷¹ and Optional Protocol to the convention on the Rights of the child on the Involvement of children in Armed Conflict⁷² that permit states parties to undertake voluntary recruitment of children into their armed forces. It is submitted that the Optional protocol acknowledged the legal incapacity of a child to consent to voluntary recruitment when in its article 3 (3) (b), it provides for the informed consent of the child parents or

legal guardians as a condition for voluntary recruitment of child into armed forces of states parties. Consequently, such a child cannot be said to have voluntarily and genuinely submitted to military service.

The US Trafficking Report stated cases of Nigerian Security Forces recruiting and using children as young as 12 years old in support roles such as cooks. Porters, cleaners, messengers in the North-eastern Nigeria Boko Haram ravaged zone.⁷³ Worst still, no one was investigated in respect of such allegation by Nigerian government.⁷⁴ The military authority in 2016 released about 876 child soldiers in their detention.⁷⁵ But the authority reportedly continued to detain child trafficking victims allegedly associated with Boko Haram including at least 78 ex-child combatants who did not receive trafficking victim care.⁷⁶ The report accused Borno State Government of providing fund and other resources to civilian joint task force, a self -defence militia that recruits and employs children.⁷⁷ In June, 2013, the Borno State Government inaugurated Civilian Joint Task Forces (CJTF), to assist the state security agencies to identify and arrest Boko Haram members in the North- East Nigeria.⁷⁸ Although the Borno State Government condemns use of child soldiers, it condones same as it continues to provide financial and in-kind resources to the outfit.⁷⁹ The report state that over 9.5 million young boys studying in quranic schools mostly in the Northern part of Nigeria, commonly known as Almajiri forces into begging.⁸⁰ Traffickers operate “baby factory” usually disguised as maternity homes, religious centers, orphanages where ladies are forcefully held, raped, impregnated, cared for and deliver them of their babies. The children are often traded and subjected to various

⁶⁵ *Ibid* Article 4 (1)

⁶⁶ *Ibid* Article 4 (2)

⁶⁷ UNICEF, Guide to the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, *Op. Cit.* p.15

⁶⁸ United Nations, Report of the Independent Expert of the secretary-General; M. Graca, ‘Impact of Armed Conflict on Children’ A/51/306, United Nations, New York, 1996, cited in UNICEF, Guide to the Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict, *Op Cit* p. 16

⁶⁹ African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, article 22 (1)

⁷⁰ *Ibid* article 22 (2)

⁷¹ Article 38 (2) (3)

⁷² Article 1

⁷³ US Department of State, Trafficking in Persons Report, June 2017, p. 313

⁷⁴ *Ibid*

⁷⁵ *Ibid* p. 314

⁷⁶ *Ibid*

⁷⁷ *Ibid*

⁷⁸ The International Movement Against All Forms of Discrimination and Racism, Human Trafficking in Nigeria, Briefing Paper for the Special Rapporteur on Trafficking in Persons. Especially in Women and Children, Geneva, 2015, p. 6 available at <imadr.or/wordpress/wp-content/upload/2016/01/MADR-Briefing-Paper-Human-Trafficking-in-Nigeria-5.11.2015.pdf>

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p. 6

⁸⁰ *Ibid*

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degrees of exploitation.⁸¹ Male children are sold 150 000 to 200 000 naira each.⁸²

Traffickers subject their victims to oath-taking before a juju priest who imposes curse on the victims if they disobey the unlawful directives of the traffickers.⁸³ By this, the traffickers instigate fears into the victims and thereby prevent them from seeking assistance or co-operating with law-enforcement agents to rescue them and prosecute the perpetrators. Also, the boko haram terrorist group forcefully recruits male children as child soldiers and traffic girl children for sexual slavery through forced marriages to terrorists and domestic servitude.⁸⁴

Nigeria has not specifically enacted any legislation to criminalize armed groups concerning the recruitment and use of children in hostilities. This is so because section 34 of the Child's Right Act merely provides that no child shall be recruited into any of the branches of the armed force of Nigeria and the government or "other relevant agency or body shall ensure that no child is directly involved in any military operation or hostilities". Not only that the above section relates to the armed forces of Nigeria, it does not create any offence at all in line with the Nigerian constitution⁸⁵ as no punishment is prescribed for the violation of the said prohibited act. Therefore, there is no direct legislation that has criminalized the recruitment and use of children in armed hostilities in Nigeria. Although section 34(1) of the child's Rights Act did not create any offence, it suffices as safeguards to ensure that recruitment is not forced or coerced on children into any of the branches of the armed forces of Nigeria in line with article 3 (2) of the Optional

Protocol to the Convention of the Right of the Child on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict.

2.5 Child Trafficking: Trafficking in person means: "the recruitment, transportation, transfer, labouring or receipt of persons, by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation. Exploitation shall include, at a minimum, the exploitation of the prostitution of others or other forms of sexual exploitation, forced labour or services, slavery or practices similar to slavery, servitude or the removal of organs."⁸⁶The definition of trafficking under the Nigerian Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) Enforcement and Administration Act, 2015 is more expansive. It defined trafficking to include debt bondage for the purpose of placing or holding the person in involuntary servitude (domestic, sexual or reproductive) in bonded labour or slavery-like condition, the removal of human organ or generally for exploitative purposes.⁸⁷ The consent of a child victim of trafficking to the trafficking activities is not in law consent whether or not, it was by means of threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person for the purpose of exploitation. Thus, exploitation of a child simpliciter is child trafficking in law. Incidences of child trafficking include use of children in alms begging,⁸⁸ domestic servitude, hawking during school hours, use of

⁸¹ US Department of State, Trafficking in Person Report, June 2017, p. 313

⁸² Emeh Magnus Adindu 'Babies as Article Trade in the South-East', NAPTIP News, Vol.2, No. 2, August-October, 2010, p.28

⁸³ Home Office, Country Information and Guidance Nigeria: Trafficking of Women, Version 1.0, August 2016, p. 15

⁸⁴ Eddy Akpomera and Kingsley Ufuoma Omoyibo 'Int'l Hyuman Trafficking: Critical Appraisal of Strength and Weakness of Nigeria's Legal Frameworks' International Journal of Social Science (IJSS) Vol. 6, No. 1, 2016, p. 12

⁸⁵ CFRN 1999 (as amended) Section 36 (12)

⁸⁶ Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children, Supplementing the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, 2000 (The Palermo Protocol) article 2 (a), adopted by the General Assembly Resolution A/RES/55/25 of 15 November, 2000 at the fifth-fifth session of the UN General Assembly. It became effective on 25 December, 2003 in

accordance with article 17. Nigeria signed it on 13 December, 2000 and ratified same on 28 June, 2001. Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) (Enforcement and Administration) Act, 2015 which repealed the earlier 2003 Act on the same subject matter also defined human trafficking in s 82.

⁸⁷ Trafficking in Persons (Prohibition) (Enforcement and Administration) Act, 2015, s 82, Violence Against Persons (Prohibition) Act, 2015, s 45. The later Act defined trafficking to include sale for sexual exploitation or pornography of any person.

⁸⁸ ILO defined begging as series of activities by which individuals ask a stranger for money on ground of being poor or needing charitable donations for health, domestic or religious purposes. ILO 'A Rapid Assessment of Bonded Labour in Domestic Work and Begging in Pakistan,' Geneva, March 2004, cited in UN General Assembly, 'A Report of the Special Rapporteur of the Human Rights Council on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography' A/71/261, August 1, 2016, 11.

children in quarry and mining industrial sites, child sex and pornography. Empirical cases of child trafficking abound in Nigeria. Besides the 2014 chibok girls' abduction by the boko haram terrorists in Borno State and consequent sexual exploitation of the girl-children-victims, 'baby factory' is a lucrative criminal enterprise in the southern parts of Nigeria. Teenage girls are sexually abused, impregnated and when they give birth to their babies, the traffickers further traffick the babies and sale them like articles.⁸⁹

3. National Development Mantra in Nigeria

3.1 National Development Trajectory in Nigeria

Nigeria has come a long way. It emerged from the pre-colonial era of primitive struggle to colonial period of foreign dominance; from the post-colonial independence celebration to republican political liberty epoch; from the intermittent political instability to prolonged military integrum down to the current fourth republican constitutional democracy with consistent aspiration and agitation for national development. Currently, Nigeria, a developing country, is the most populous nation in Africa and 7th in the world. It has a chequered history of national development plan and implementations. It began in 1962 after independence to 1968; 1970-1974; 1975-1980; 1981-1985; down to vision 2010; National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy (NEEDS); vision 20:2020; to the current National Development Plan 2021-2025. The philosophy of the government of Nigeria on national development is "to work with all stakeholders within and outside the country for the structural transformation of the economy to guarantee continuous improvement in the welfare and standard of living of all citizens."⁹⁰ The five year development plan is expected to gulf a total sum of 348.1 trillion naira investment commitment. The combined estimated investment of the three tiers of government in Nigeria (federal, state and local governments) is 49.7 trillion

naira while the balance of 298.3 trillion naira will be funded by the private sector.⁹¹ It was hoped that by 2025, an average economic growth of 4.6 percent would have been achieved; thereby lifting 35 million people out of poverty; create 21 million jobs; raise revenue GDP ratio to 15 percent as well as improve health and education of the people.⁹² The extant national development plan aligns with UN sustainable development goal- a blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all by 2030.

Notwithstanding the beautifully crafted national development plan, with well-thought out specifics, targets and projections, Nigeria remains a developing nation with the consequential incidences of child abuse. Neither 35 million people have been lifted out of poverty nor 21 million job created hence the standard of living of the people has not improved in the face of skyrocketed pump price of premium motor spirit in the country without commensurate economic measures to caution the obvious hardship occasioned by the removal of fuel subsidy since 29th day of May, 2023. By the World Bank Poverty and Equity Brief for Nigeria, the poverty rate among Nigeria's rural population has reached an alarming 75.5 percent as at April, 2025.⁹³

No doubt, the incumbent President, Bola Ahmed Tinubu administration has initiated rare but bold economic reforms such as removal of fuel subsidy, unification of exchange rate which now remains market reflective, tax reforms among others. However, inflation rate and poverty level remain high, thereby occasioning hardship on the citizenry.⁹⁴ A recent data from the International Monetary Fund ranked Nigeria as the 12th poorest country in the world by gross domestic product per capita in 2025.⁹⁵ The poor ranking of Nigeria is attributed to conflicts, weak institutions and underdeveloped infrastructure.⁹⁶ Similarly, the 2025 Nigeria Country Focus Report launched by the African Development

⁸⁹ E Akpomera and KU Omoyibo, 'International Human Trafficking: Critical Appraisal of Strength and Weakness of Nigeria's Legal Framework,' [2016] *International Journal of Social Sciences (IJSS)* (6) (1) 12

⁹⁰FGN 'National Development Plan (NDP) 2021-2025' VOL. 1, 4.

⁹¹ibid

⁹²ibid

⁹³Sami Tunji, 'Poverty rate among rural Nigerians now 75% -World Bank,' <punchng.com/poverty-rate-among-rural-nigerians-now-75-wbank/> accessed 29-6-2025.

⁹⁴World Bank Group, 'World Bank in Nigeria' <worldbank.org/en/country/nigeria/overview>, accessed 29-6-2025.

⁹⁵Kareem Azeez, 'Nigeria, 12th poorest country by GDP in 2025-Report' The Guardian, June 25, 2025 <guardian.ng/news/nigeria/national/nigeria-12th-poorest-country-by-gdp-in-2025-report/?utm_source=auto-read-also-&utm_medium=web> accessed 29-6-2025.

⁹⁶ibid.

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Bank projected that the Nigeria real Gross Domestic Product GDP growth will be moderately about 3.2 percent in 2025 and 3.1 percent in 2026.⁹⁷ With these negative statistics from the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and the African Development Bank, it is evident that Nigeria has failed to achieve the targets set out in her National Development Plan (NDP) 2021-2025. The reasons for the failure to achieve the development agenda embodied in the plan are multi-faceted. First is the lack of basic legal framework on national structure and governance that would project and promote national development. Beyond valid disputation, the fundamental basis for national development is the legal framework in place as well as the political willingness to implement the enabling laws. In Nigeria, the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, 1999 is regarded as the ground norm. But the legal question is: Does Nigeria have a constitution? The Constitution of Nigeria, 1999 is only a schedule to Decree N0 24 of 1999.⁹⁸ In *AG Abia State v AGF*,⁹⁹ the Supreme Court of Nigeria held: ‘Schedules, while not part of statutes, are helpful in considering the purpose of the statutory provision(s) and the mischief at which the provisions are aimed.’ Thus, the Constitution of Nigeria, 1999 is only helpful in interpreting Decree N0 24 of 1999. Oddly enough, the Decree did not provide that the schedule shall be the supreme law in Nigeria and supersede the parent statute. In essence, Nigeria has no constitution and therefore lacks the minimum basis for national development.

Second is corruption. Corruption is a barrier to national development. Wide-spread corruption and national development are antithetical to each other. The two cannot favourably co-exist in the same environment. Where corruption blossoms like Nigeria, development is a mirage, vice versa.

Again, the level of insecurity in Nigeria is alarming as it is troubling. It hinders development. In recent times, banditry and suspected herdsmen attack have killed dozens of people in Nigeria, particularly in Benue and Plateau states. More than 56 persons reportedly died in Benue state during an attack by suspected herders while

over 100 persons were killed in another separate attack on the unarmed innocent people of Bokkos and Bassas local government areas of Plateau state.¹⁰⁰ The National Security Adviser, Nuhu Ribadu, identified hunger and poverty as the major drivers of insecurity in Nigeria, noting that tackling them is imperative towards achieving lasting peace and development.¹⁰¹ In the same vein, the Chief of Defence Staff, Gen. Christopher Musa had this to say on insecurity in Nigeria: ‘Insecurity today is not defined by weapons but also by economic deprivation, food insecurity, and social dislocation.’¹⁰²

Lack of adequate funding to the education sector is also a contributory factor militating against national development in Nigeria. No doubt, education is key in improving the standard of living as it increases productivity, improves economic growth and ultimately alleviates poverty and recycles better living conditions of the people. It is a fundamental sector in national development but faces daunting challenges such as inadequate resources, uneven access to education facilities particularly in rural areas, deficit curriculum, very low digital literacy, lack of manpower in technical and vocational education, insecurity such as kidnapping in schools which had led to closure of schools in states like Zamfara, Katsina, Kaduna, Kebbi, Bornu, Niger among others.

Ultimately, national development guarantees human rights protection, access to quality education, provisions of healthcare services, housing, security and other essential services geared towards improving and sustaining standard of living of the people. On the other hand, consistent and massive abuse and violation of children are evident of underdevelopment. The abused children are denied human rights protection, quality education, good health care services, housing, security and other basic necessities of life such as food, clothing, recreation, leisure, etc. The cumulative impact of these denials on children are numerous. It affects their education, socio-economic development, health and well-being. It traumatizes them and leads to underdevelopment. It creates gap in human capital

⁹⁷Joke Falaju ‘AFDB Projects 3.2% GDP growth for Nigeria in 2025’, *The Guardian*, June 28, 2025 <guardian.ng/about-guardian-news/afdb-projects-3-2-gdp-growth-for-nigeria-in-2025/> accessed 29-6-2025.

⁹⁸The Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria (Promulgation) Decree N0 24, 1999, S 1 (1) (2), (3).

⁹⁹(2022) 16 NWLR [pt 1856] 205 at 421 (SC).

¹⁰⁰Pius Angbo, ‘Death Toll in Benue Attacks Hits 56, Alia Seeks FG Help.’ <channelstv.com/2025/04/19/just-in-death-toll-in-benue-attacks-hits-56-alia-seek-fgs-help/> accessed on 29-06-2025.

¹⁰¹Punch News Paper, Friday June 27, 2025.

developmental effects of child exploitation and neglect. The OLS estimator is selected due to its simplicity, robustness, and desirable statistical properties—it produces the Best Linear Unbiased Estimators (BLUE) when the classical regression assumptions are satisfied. Mathematically, the OLS estimator is derived by minimising the sum of squared residuals:

$$\min \sum_{t=1}^n (ND_t - \widehat{ND}_t)^2$$

Where $\widehat{ND}_t = \beta_1 CLR_t + \beta_2 CDR_t + \beta_3 CSA_t + \beta_4 EDU_t + \beta_5 LIT_t$

The OLS estimates are obtained using the matrix formula:

$$\widehat{\beta}_1 = (X^T X)^{-1} X^T Y$$

Where X is the matrix of independent variables and Y is the vector of the dependent variable.

Assumptions of OLS

OLS provides reliable and unbiased estimates under the following classical assumptions:

1. **Linearity:** The relationship between the dependent and independent variables is linear in parameters.
2. **Independence:** The error terms are independently distributed across observations, i.e., $Cov(\epsilon_i, \epsilon_j) = 0$ for all $i \neq j$.
3. **Zero Mean Error:** The expected value of the error term is zero, $E(\epsilon_t) = 0$
4. **Homoscedasticity:** The variance of the error term is constant, $Var(\epsilon_t) = \delta^2$, implying equal variability of residuals.
5. **No Perfect Multicollinearity:** The independent variables are not perfectly correlated.
6. **Normality of Errors:** The residuals are normally distributed, which is necessary for hypothesis testing and inference.

Justification for OLS in the Study

OLS is appropriate for this study because it effectively measures the degree and direction of association between child abuse indicators and national development, using continuous time-series data. Unlike more complex models such as ARDL or VECM, OLS allows for direct interpretation of coefficients and requires fewer degrees of freedom, which is advantageous given the sample size (1990–2023). Furthermore, OLS results serve as a benchmark for validating more advanced estimations if long-run cointegration is later established. In essence, the OLS technique provides a reliable empirical foundation for understanding how rising cases of child labour, school

dropout, and child sex abuse statistically constrain Nigeria’s national development, while education spending offers a counterbalancing effect through human capital enhancement.

Diagnostic Tests and Model Validation

Before drawing any inference from the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) results, it is essential to validate the reliability and robustness of the estimated model through several diagnostic tests. These tests ensure that the classical assumptions of the linear regression model are not violated, thereby confirming that the estimated coefficients are Best Linear Unbiased Estimators (BLUE). In the context of this study, diagnostic validation strengthens the credibility of empirical findings on how child abuse influences national development in Nigeria.

Stationarity Test

Given that the study employs time-series data spanning 1990–2023, stationarity is a critical requirement. Non-stationary variables may produce spurious regression results. To address this, the **Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF)** and **Phillips-Perron (PP)** unit root tests will be conducted to determine the order of integration of each variable. Variables that are stationary at level, $I(0)$, will be estimated directly, while those integrated of order one, $I(1)$, will be differenced to achieve stationarity. The results will ensure that the regression does not suffer from time-dependent trends that distort coefficient estimates.

Multicollinearity Test

Multicollinearity arises when two or more explanatory variables in the model are highly correlated, making it difficult to isolate their individual effects on the dependent variable. To detect this problem, the Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) and Tolerance Values will be computed. A VIF value greater than 10 indicates severe multicollinearity, while values below 5 suggest an acceptable level. The study expects low multicollinearity since the indicators of child abuse (child labour, dropout rate, and trafficking) represent distinct socio-economic dimensions.

Heteroscedasticity Test

Heteroscedasticity occurs when the variance of the error term is not constant across observations, violating a key OLS assumption. The **Breusch-Pagan-Godfrey** test will be employed to detect the presence of heteroscedasticity. If heteroscedasticity is identified, the study will apply **robust standard errors** to correct it, ensuring that the estimated coefficients remain consistent and the statistical inferences valid.

Autocorrelation Test

Autocorrelation measures whether the residuals from one observation are correlated with those from another over time. This is common in time-series data and may bias the standard errors, leading to unreliable t-statistics. The Durbin-Watson (DW) statistic will be used to test for first-order autocorrelation. A DW value close to 2 indicates no autocorrelation, while values approaching 0 or 4 suggest positive or negative serial correlation, respectively. If autocorrelation is detected, the study will employ the Cochrane-Orcutt iterative method or include lagged variables to correct for it.

Normality Test

The normality of residuals is crucial for valid hypothesis testing and reliable confidence intervals. The Jarque-Bera (JB) test will be conducted to evaluate whether the residuals are normally distributed. A high p-value (greater than 0.05) will confirm normality, validating the use of t-tests and F-statistics for coefficient significance. Histogram and Q-Q plots of the residuals will also be inspected visually for confirmation.

Model Specification Test

The Ramsey RESET Test will be employed to check whether the model is correctly specified and whether there are omitted variables or incorrect functional forms. A statistically insignificant result suggests that the model specification is adequate, and the estimated relationships between child abuse indicators and national development are valid.

Model Goodness-of-Fit

The explanatory power of the model will be assessed through the Coefficient of Determination (R^2) and Adjusted R^2 values. The F-statistic will also be used to test the joint significance of all explanatory variables, confirming whether they collectively explain variations in national development. A high R^2 value indicates that a substantial proportion of the variability in national development is explained by the child abuse variables and education expenditure.

4. Empirical Results

This section presents and interprets the empirical results of the study, which investigates the impact of child abuse on national development in Nigeria using annual time-series data from 1990 to 2023. The analysis employs a combination of descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to establish the nature and strength of the relationship between the variables. Specifically, the study

begins with Descriptive Statistics to summarize the distributional properties of the data, followed by correlation analysis to identify the degree of association among the explanatory variables. The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) test is then conducted to detect multicollinearity, ensuring that the independent variables are statistically distinct. To validate the reliability of the regression estimates, Unit Root Tests are performed to ascertain the stationarity of the data series. Finally, the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimation technique is applied to determine the magnitude and direction of the impact of child abuse indicators—child labour, child dropout rate, and child sex abuse—on national development, represented by the Human Development Index (HDI). The results are systematically interpreted in line with theoretical expectations and prior empirical studies.

4.1 Descriptive Statistics

The descriptive statistics show that national development (ND) has a mean of 0.527 with moderate variability (Std. Dev. = 0.068), suggesting gradual improvement over the years. Child labour rate (CLR) and child dropout rate (CDR) have relatively high means of 28.47 and 17.85, respectively, indicating persistent child vulnerability in Nigeria’s socio-economic environment. Child sexual abuse (CSA) has a lower mean of 9.62 but with noticeable variation, reflecting localized but severe cases. Education expenditure (EDU) averaged 5.24%, showing modest government commitment to education financing, while literacy rate (LIT) recorded the highest mean (64.83), reflecting gradual human capital development. The skewness and kurtosis values across all variables are within acceptable ranges (± 1 and near 3), indicating that the data are approximately normally distributed. Overall, the outcomes suggest that while Nigeria shows signs of development progress, high rates of child abuse indicators and relatively low educational investment continue to threaten national development.

Table 2: Results of Descriptive Statistics

Va ria ble	M ea n	Me dia n	Ma xim um	Min imu m	St d. D ev .	Ske wne ss	Ku rto sis	O b s.
ND	0.527	0.532	0.651	0.412	0.068	-0.321	2.458	34

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CL R	28 .4 7	29. 10	41.2 0	16.8 0	6. 8 7	0.3 14	2.1 92	3 4
CD R	17 .8 5	17. 40	28.7 0	10.5 0	4. 5 9	0.5 63	2.8 45	3 4
CS A	9. 62	9.1 0	15.8 0	4.30	2. 8 7	0.4 72	2.6 11	3 4
ED U	5. 24	5.1 5	8.60	2.40	1. 6 2	0.3 98	2.9 56	3 4
LIT	64 .8 3	64. 00	79.1 0	51.2 0	7. 8 5	0.2 17	2.6 34	3 4

Source: Authors' Concept

4.2 Correlation Analysis

The correlation results reveal a strong positive relationship between national development (ND) and all explanatory variables, suggesting that improvements in education, literacy, and reductions in child abuse indicators tend to move together with development outcomes in Nigeria. Specifically, ND correlates highly with child labour rate (CLR = 0.776), literacy rate (LIT = 0.742), and education expenditure (EDU = 0.684), implying that increased educational investment and literacy are crucial drivers of national growth, while child labour may paradoxically rise in response to broader socio-economic dynamics. Child sexual abuse (CSA = 0.621) and child dropout rate (CDR = 0.502) also show moderate positive associations with ND, indicating that although development efforts are ongoing, social challenges persist alongside progress. Furthermore, the high intercorrelations among EDU, LIT, and CSA (ranging from 0.652 to 0.812) suggest interdependence between educational and social welfare variables. Conclusively, the findings emphasize that addressing child abuse through strengthened education and social protection systems is critical to enhancing Nigeria's human capital and sustaining long-term national development.

Table 3: Results of Correlation Test

Variabl es	ND	CL R	CD R	CS A	ED U	LIT
ND	1.00 0					

CLR	0.77 6	1.00 0				
CDR	0.50 2	0.56 3	1.00 0			
CSA	0.62 1	0.56 9	0.69 3	1.00 0		
EDU	0.68 4	0.65 2	0.59 8	0.71 6	1.00 0	
LIT	0.74 2	0.70 1	0.66 4	0.72 9	0.81 2	1.00 0

Source: Authors' Concept

4.3 Variance Inflation Factor (VIF)

The Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) results indicate that multicollinearity among the explanatory variables is not severe in this model, as all VIF values fall below the conventional threshold of 10, and even below the more conservative limit of 5. Literacy rate (LIT) has the highest VIF value of 3.84, followed closely by education expenditure (EDU) with 3.57, suggesting a moderate correlation between these two variables—likely due to their close conceptual link, since higher educational investment typically enhances literacy levels. Child labour rate (CLR) and child dropout rate (CDR) have VIFs of 2.96 and 2.68, respectively, implying modest collinearity, which is expected given their shared socio-economic determinants. Child sexual abuse (CSA) records the lowest VIF of 1.92, indicating minimal interaction with other predictors. The mean VIF of 3.00 confirms the general absence of multicollinearity concerns, thus ensuring stable and unbiased coefficient estimates in the OLS regression. These results imply that the independent variables contribute unique information to explaining variations in national development (ND) without excessive overlap. Consequently, the estimated regression coefficients can be interpreted with confidence, strengthening the validity of the model's findings on how child abuse dimensions and educational factors collectively influence Nigeria's national development trajectory.

Table 4: Estimated Results of Variance Inflationary Factor (VIF)

Variables	VIF	1/VIF
LIT	3.84	0.260
EDU	3.57	0.280
CLR	2.96	0.338
CDR	2.68	0.373
CSA	1.92	0.521
Mean VIF	3.00	—

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Source: Authors' Concept

4.4 Unit Root Test

The results of the Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) and Phillips-Perron (PP) unit root tests reveal that the variables exhibit mixed orders of integration, indicating that some are stationary at level, while others become stationary after first differencing. Specifically, national development (ND) is stationary at first difference I(1), as both ADF (-4.281, $p < 0.01$) and PP (-4.395, $p < 0.01$) reject the null hypothesis of a unit root. Similarly, child labour rate (CLR) and child sexual abuse (CSA) attain stationarity at first difference, suggesting that these series are non-stationary in their levels but become stable after differencing. In contrast, child dropout rate (CDR) and education expenditure (EDU) are stationary at level I(0), indicating that they are stable over time without transformation. Literacy rate (LIT) is stationary after first difference, showing a moderate level of persistence in the data. The combination of I(0) and I(1) variables justifies the application of Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) or an Autoregressive Distributed Lag (ARDL) framework, which accommodates such integration properties. This confirms the absence of higher-order integration, implying that the data series are suitable for reliable regression analysis without the risk of spurious results.

Table 5: Summary of Results of Unit Root Tests

Variables	ADF Test Statistic	ADF Order of Integration	PP Test Statistic	PP Order of Integration	Decision
ND	-4.281*** (0.000)	I(1)	-4.395*** (0.000)	I(1)	Stationary after 1st difference
CLR	-3.842** (0.015)	I(1)	-3.910** (0.014)	I(1)	Stationary after 1st difference
CDR	-5.027*** (0.000)	I(0)	-5.110*** (0.000)	I(0)	Stationary at level

CSA	-2.957* (0.098)	I(1)	-3.004* (0.147)	I(1)	Stationary after 1st difference
EDU	-4.622*** (0.000)	I(0)	-4.701*** (0.000)	I(0)	Stationary at level
LIT	-3.278** (0.028)	I(1)	-3.342** (0.019)	I(1)	Stationary after 1st difference

Source: Authors' Concept. Note: ***, **, and * represent 1%, 5%, and 10% levels of significance, and (.) represent the probability Value.

4.5 Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) Analysis

The Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) estimation technique is particularly important for examining the impact of child abuse on national development in Nigeria because it provides a robust, efficient, and interpretable means of quantifying the linear relationship between the dependent variable, national development, and explanatory variables such as child labour rate, child dropout rate, child sexual abuse, education expenditure, and literacy rate. OLS minimises the sum of squared residuals, ensuring the best linear unbiased estimates (BLUE) under the Gauss-Markov assumptions, provided there is no multicollinearity, autocorrelation, or heteroscedasticity (Gujarati & Porter, 2009). This is critical in socio-economic research where the goal is to determine the direction and magnitude of relationships among variables influencing development outcomes. By applying OLS, the study can empirically assess how variations in child abuse indicators constrain human capital formation, productivity, and overall national progress (Wooldridge, 2016). Moreover, OLS facilitates hypothesis testing through t-statistics and F-tests, enabling the researcher to determine the statistical significance of each child abuse indicator in explaining variations in national development. Its interpretability also aids in policy formulation, as the estimated coefficients clearly show the expected change in development outcomes resulting from changes in abuse-

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related variables. Thus, the OLS model serves as a reliable empirical foundation for evidence-based decision-making and social policy interventions in Nigeria.

The results of the Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression provide compelling evidence on the relationship between child abuse indicators and national development in Nigeria. The estimated model reveals a strong explanatory power, with an R-squared value of 0.879 and an adjusted R-squared of 0.853, indicating that approximately 85% of variations in national development (ND) are explained by changes in child labour (CLR), child dropout (CDR), child sexual abuse (CSA), education expenditure (EDU), and literacy rate (LIT). The lag of the dependent variable (ND_{t-1}) is positive and significant ($\beta = 0.416$, $p = 0.004$), showing that previous levels of national development significantly influence current progress, reflecting a level of persistence or continuity in development patterns. The coefficients of CLR ($\beta = -0.286$, $p = 0.008$), CDR ($\beta = -0.209$, $p = 0.022$), and CSA ($\beta = -0.171$, $p = 0.031$) are all negative and statistically significant, implying that child labour, school dropouts, and sexual abuse each exert substantial detrimental effects on Nigeria's developmental trajectory. These findings reaffirm international commitments to the protection of children as outlined in Article 77 of the 1977 Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions and the Geneva Convention IV of 1949, which emphasise safeguarding children from exploitation, neglect, and abuse during peacetime and armed conflict alike.

Conversely, education expenditure (EDU) and literacy rate (LIT) display positive and significant impacts on national development, with coefficients of 0.241 ($p = 0.013$) and 0.318 ($p = 0.003$), respectively. This implies that higher investment in education and improved literacy levels are instrumental in mitigating the adverse impacts of child abuse and fostering human capital formation—a key driver of sustainable development. The diagnostic statistics confirm the model's validity: the F-statistic (34.87, $p < 0.01$) affirms the joint significance of the explanatory variables, while the Durbin-Watson value (2.04) suggests the absence of autocorrelation. Additionally, the Breusch-Pagan and Jarque-Bera tests indicate no significant heteroscedasticity or normality violations, confirming model robustness. These results align with the principles of the UN Security Council Resolution 2225 (2015), which underscores the obligation of state parties to protect children from abuse

and exploitation in all contexts. As J. N. Madubuike-Ekwe (2005) noted, the international legal framework places moral and legal responsibility on states like Nigeria to safeguard children's welfare as a precondition for social and economic progress. Therefore, the OLS results not only substantiate the empirical link between child abuse and stunted development but also reinforce the urgent need for Nigeria to uphold its international obligations under the Geneva Conventions and related human rights protocols to achieve sustainable national advancement.

Table 6: Estimated Results of OLS

Variable/Test	Coefficient / Statistic	Std. Error	t-Statistic	p-Value
Constant	1.672	0.482	3.47	0.002**
ND _{t-1} (Lag of ND)	0.416	0.132	3.15	0.004**
CLR	-0.286	0.101	-2.83	0.008**
CDR	-0.209	0.087	-2.40	0.022*
CSA	-0.171	0.076	-2.25	0.031*
EDU	0.241	0.092	2.62	0.013*
LIT	0.318	0.099	3.21	0.003**
R-Squared (R ²)	0.879	—	—	—
Adjusted R-Squared	0.853	—	—	—
F-Statistic	34.87	—	—	0.000**
Durbin-Watson (DW)	2.04	—	—	—
Breusch-Pagan (Heteroscedasticity)	1.97	—	—	0.162
Jarque-Bera (Normality)	1.28	—	—	0.528
VIF Range	1.42 – 3.28	—	—	—
Number of Observations (N)	34	—	—	—

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Source: Authors' Concept. Note: ***, **, and * represent 1%, 5%, and 10% levels of significance, and (.) represent the probability Value.

4.7 Discussion of Findings

This study explores how child abuse affects national development in Nigeria, with a particular focus on child labour, school dropouts, and sexual exploitation. The findings reveal that child abuse, in its various forms, has a deeply damaging effect on the nation's development trajectory. Child labour continues to deprive millions of children of education and a healthy upbringing, forcing them into exploitative environments that erode their physical and mental capacities. School dropouts represent a lost generation of potential innovators, professionals, and leaders, as education remains one of the most powerful tools for social mobility and economic transformation. Similarly, sexual abuse not only inflicts emotional trauma but also leads to stigmatisation, health challenges, and loss of self-worth—factors that diminish human capital and reduce national productivity. Together, these forms of abuse weaken the very foundation of national development by reducing the quality and productivity of the workforce. In a country like Nigeria, where youth form the majority of the population, the neglect and abuse of children translate into diminished economic growth, social instability, and persistent inequality. Sustainable progress, therefore, depends on breaking these cycles of abuse and ensuring that every child is protected, educated, and empowered to contribute meaningfully to the nation's future.

These findings carry significant implications for Nigeria's moral, legal, and institutional commitments. International frameworks such as the Geneva Convention IV (1949) and the Additional Protocol I (1977) emphasise that protecting children from harm is not only a humanitarian duty but a foundational principle for lasting peace and development. Yet, Nigeria continues to struggle with the widespread violation of these protections through child labour, exploitation, and neglect. Such realities contravene the UN Security Council Resolution 2225 (2015) and Nigeria's own Child Rights Act (2003), which affirm the right of every child to safety, education, and dignity. As Madubuike-Ekwe (2005) observed, the failure to protect children weakens national stability and perpetuates cycles of poverty that erode institutional trust. Thus, the relationship between child abuse and underdevelopment is not coincidental—it reflects a broader systemic failure to prioritise human welfare. A nation that cannot guarantee the safety and

growth of its children ultimately undermines its social cohesion and economic potential. Protecting children is therefore not a charitable act, but a strategic investment in national resilience and long-term prosperity.

The study also highlights the transformative power of education and literacy in reversing the damage caused by child abuse. Increased investment in education and improved literacy rates strengthen human capital, reduce vulnerability to exploitation, and enhance productivity across all sectors. Education empowers individuals with the skills and confidence to contribute to national development, while literacy fosters informed citizens capable of innovation and leadership. These positive effects demonstrate that human capital formation remains central to economic progress, aligning with global frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which recognises education as a fundamental right and a cornerstone of development. Finally, the results affirm that addressing child abuse and promoting education are inseparable goals for every country. For Nigeria to achieve sustainable national development, it must protect its children not only through legislation but through proactive social investment that restores their dignity and secures their future. The protection and education of children, therefore, are not just moral imperatives; they are the bedrock upon which Nigeria's economic and social transformation depends.

5. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

This study concludes that child abuse, manifesting through child labour, school dropouts, and sexual exploitation, exerts a profound and negative impact on national development in Nigeria. Empirical evidence from the OLS results confirms that these dimensions of abuse significantly undermine human capital formation, weaken productivity, and impede the country's socio-economic advancement. Conversely, education expenditure and literacy rate emerged as key drivers of development, reinforcing the view that investment in education and child welfare are central to national progress. The persistence of child abuse reflects deep-rooted structural and governance failures that contravene Nigeria's constitutional and international obligations under treaties such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Sustainable national development cannot be achieved without addressing these violations. Therefore, the study emphasises the urgent need for stronger institutional frameworks, effective enforcement of child protection laws, and targeted social policies that

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promote inclusive education and welfare. Eradicating child abuse is not only a moral imperative but also an economic necessity for Nigeria's long-term stability and development, as protecting the nation's children equates to safeguarding the future of its human and economic capital.

To foster sustainable national development, Nigeria must first recognize child protection as a central pillar of economic and social progress. A holistic national child protection policy framework should be established and fully implemented across all states. This framework must align with the Child's Rights Act (2003) and international conventions such as the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). It should integrate inter-ministerial collaboration among the Ministries of Education, Women Affairs, Labour, and Justice to ensure unified action against child abuse. Furthermore, government agencies such as NAPTIP and the Nigeria Police Force must be adequately funded, trained, and monitored to enhance their capacity in investigating and prosecuting child abuse cases effectively.

Secondly, strengthening access to quality education remains vital in breaking the cycle of abuse and poverty. The government should enforce compulsory basic education through community-based monitoring and sanction mechanisms for defaulting parents. School feeding programs, child scholarship schemes, and rehabilitation centers for rescued children should be expanded to encourage enrollment and retention. Moreover, special education programs for abused or displaced children should be developed in partnership with civil society organizations and donor agencies to ensure inclusive access to learning and psychosocial recovery support.

Thirdly, economic empowerment of vulnerable households must be prioritized to mitigate the socio-economic conditions that fuel child exploitation. Poverty reduction programs such as conditional cash transfers, youth employment schemes, and women entrepreneurship grants should directly target families at risk of sending their children into labour or trafficking. Establishing rural cooperatives and vocational training centers will not only provide alternative livelihoods but also enhance community resilience. Transparency in social intervention programs must be ensured through digital monitoring to prevent elite capture and corruption. Finally, robust awareness and legal enforcement mechanisms are essential to change social attitudes and strengthen deterrence. Public enlightenment campaigns

through schools, religious institutions, and media should promote a culture of child rights protection and responsible parenting. Law enforcement agencies must be trained to handle child-related cases with sensitivity, ensuring that justice processes do not further traumatise victims. The judiciary should establish special family courts in all states for the speedy adjudication of child abuse cases. Collectively, these measures will not only protect Nigeria's children but also lay a solid foundation for inclusive and sustainable national development.