



CHILD ABUSE AND MENTAL HEALTH FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR COUNSELLING

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ABSTRACT

This study provides a groundwork for child abuse, its causes and effects on child's mental well-being and the implications on sustainable development of the country. It is estimated that 218 million kids between the ages of 5 and 17 across the world are engaged in child labour in one form or another, and this exposes them to hazardous chemicals, working conditions and accidents that are detrimental to the mental and physical development of a child. The study discusses the role of counselling psychologists while amplifying their responsibilities to abused children. It also discusses the issues that should be considered in the assessment and treatment of abused children and their families. The study posits that dealing with child abuse and mental health will be more effective when counselling psychologists leave the four walls of the school to provide support for abused children who are already traumatized emotionally, thus, integrating them into the school system to function maximally in the society and every area of their lives.

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1. Introduction

The global critical concern is on child exploitation and abuse, their impacts on child's quality education and well-being. Child abuse is believed to have serious consequences on society, and governments across the world are particularly concerned about it. Many media outlets, academics, and people from all walks of life have been compelled by this issue to try to explain and study child abuse, paying particular attention to its causes and possible solutions. Globally, over one billion children ages 2–17 years are victims of violence against children annually. Thirty-eight reports provided quality data for 96 countries on past-year prevalence of violence against children. Base case estimates showed a minimum of 50% or more of children in Asia, Africa, and Northern America experienced past-year violence (Hillis, Mercy, et al 2016).

According to Nigeria's 1995 Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, any behaviour by a parent, guardian, caregiver, or other family member toward a child that threatens or affects the child's physical or emotional health and development is considered child abuse. When an adult mistreats or neglects a child, it is considered child abuse. When someone takes advantage of their position of trust and power, they are abusing it (Jindal, 2019). Parents, guardians, paid caregivers,

or siblings are all examples of caregivers. Children rely on adults to keep them safe, provide for their needs, and make sure they have enough to eat. The victim's sense of security is lowered because of the abuse. It also increases their vulnerability to future exploitation and abuse.

As stated by Dodaj and Sesar (2020), childhood abuse refers to all forms of maltreatment that cause actual or potential harm to the child's health, survival, development, or dignity. Children's health and safety and even their psychological adjustment might be jeopardized when they witness domestic abuse, which has been recognized in recent years. The growing interest in child abuse and neglect research is most likely due to growing public concern about the potential detrimental impacts of such practices.

Child abuse, according to Ugoji (2020), is not merely a problem that affects a single person or family. Also, children who have survived abuse are more likely to have a detrimental impact on society, not only by passing on the trauma they experienced to their own children. Thus, the epidemic of child abuse spills over into society and leads to other problems. Child abuse has terrible and long-lasting impacts on the victims, as well as widespread ramifications for society. The bad effects of an abusive upbringing can be compensated for until some additional stress is imposed, such as a physical disease, the birth of a child, and/or the death of family members. Victims of emotional, physical, sexual, and verbal abuse suffer psychological harm that can last a lifetime in addition to the obvious consequences (physical injury and stress-related physical problems). Abuse can have a variety of negative consequences, including chronic depression, anxiety, and behavioural issues, as well as academic difficulties. An abusive parent who keeps tight reins on his/her child will cause him/her to lose his/her sense of wonder and curiosity about the world. He/She will stop trying new things which can affect the child's intellectual potential.

Abuse's impact on a child's physiological well-being must also be considered. Autonomic and endocrine hyperarousal is a result of repeated exposure to violence and trauma. For the most part, the sufferer becomes anxious, and when this state of hyperarousal is repeatedly experienced, lasting physiological changes occur. It is possible to think of these changes as the old you: less responsiveness to stimuli, difficulty paying attention and focus, a general lack of feeling, and heart problems. Because children differ in terms of resiliency and personality, they react differently to the same kinds of harmful events.

Physical abuse in childhood increases the risk of reporting more diagnosed illnesses and physical symptoms approximately 40 years after the abuse had taken place (Arta & Kristina, 2020). Children who have been physically abused, unlike others, are more likely to develop arthritis,

ulcers, depression, and headache/migraines in adulthood (Tietjen, Brandes, et al., 2007; Heim, Bradley et al., 2019). Other outcomes, such as type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure, cardiovascular disease, respiratory disease, neurological disorder, and cancer, have weak and inconsistent links. The size of the hippocampus was discovered to be altered in children who had been physically abused as children (reduction). "Electro-physiological abnormalities were found in the frontotemporal and anterior regions of the brain, as well as cerebral atrophy, cerebral ischemia, and hormonal alterations" (Heo, Kwon, et al., 2022).

2. Statement of the Problem

Child abuse, in its various forms, poses a significant threat to the mental health and overall well-being of children, potentially impeding their ability to thrive and contribute to sustainable development. While the detrimental effects of child abuse on mental health have been widely acknowledged, there is a need for a qualitative study to explore the nuanced ways in which child abuse impacts the mental health of survivors and to identify the implications of this impact on sustainable development. Additionally, this study aims to uncover the role and effectiveness of counselling as an intervention to address the mental health challenges resulting from child abuse. By addressing these questions, this qualitative study aims to provide a deeper understanding of the intersection between child abuse, mental health, and sustainable development, with a focus on the role of counselling in mitigating the adverse effects of child abuse and fostering the well-being and resilience of survivors. The findings of this study can inform policy development, counselling practices, and advocacy efforts aimed at promoting the mental health of child abuse survivors and, consequently, contribute to the achievement of sustainable development goals.

3. Objectives of the Study

- i. To explore and understand the various forms of child abuse, including physical, emotional, sexual abuse, and neglect, and the factors that contribute to a child's maltreatment.
- ii. To determine the prevalence of child abuse, in its diverse forms, and assess its impact on the mental health of survivors.
- iii. To examine the specific effects of child abuse, encompassing both short-term and long-term consequences, on the physical and mental health of children, with a focus on mental health outcomes.
- iv. To investigate the potential implications of child abuse and its effects on mental health for sustainable development, including the hindrances it poses to the child's potential contributions to society and broader community development.

v. To assess the role and effectiveness of counselling as an intervention in addressing the mental health challenges resulting from child abuse, with an emphasis on its contribution to mitigating the adverse consequences on survivors and their potential for positive engagement in sustainable development efforts.

By formulating these objectives, the study will systematically investigate child abuse, its causes, prevalence, mental health effects, and how counselling can be a valuable tool in addressing the mental health challenges posed by child abuse, all while keeping in mind the broader implications for sustainable development.

4. Theoretical Framework

The theory that underpins this academic enquiry and discourse is Social Learning Theory.

4.1 Social Learning Theory (SLT)

The social learning theory, also known as social cognitive theory, was propounded by Albert Bandura in 1977. The theory emphasizes the role of observational learning, imitation, and modelling.

In behaviour acquisition. It was based on the principle that people learn not only from their own experiences but also by examining the behaviour, attitudes, and consequences of others using the information to form their own actions. The key concepts used in the theory include four basic learning requirements, that is, attention, retention, reproduction, and motivation. The individuals that are observed are called models. In society, children are surrounded by many influential models, such as parents, characters on children's TV, friends within their peer group, and teachers at school.

In the context of child abuse, this theory can be applied to understand how patterns of abusive behaviours are perpetuated across generations.

5. Research Method

Research is generally a systematic attempt to provide answers to questions. In this research, secondary sources of data collection were used to gather and identify relevant information. For this study, a qualitative method of data gathering is used¹. To carry out an exploration and critical assessment of the topic. the study adopts the *ex post facto* and historical methods of inquiry. As the name implies, *ex post facto* means "after the fact" or "retrospectively". Thus, it is a systematic empirical study or studies which investigate possible cause-and-effect relationships by observing an existing condition and searching back in time for plausible causal factors. Therefore, it is a form of descriptive research.

6.0 Literature Review

6.1 Child Abuse in its Various Forms

Neglect, emotional abuse, physical abuse, and sexual abuse are the four main types of child abuse (Newton, 2001). There are three main types of neglect: physical neglect, which involves not giving appropriate food, clothing, medical care, or supervision, and may include abandonment.

1. Emotional abuse, which includes a lack of emotional support; and sexual neglect, which includes sexual abuse.

2. Educational neglect is the failure to provide appropriate education (financial and materials)

3. Psychological neglect includes allowing the child to participate in drug or alcohol use, as well as spousal abuse, drug, and alcohol abuse. Parents and caregivers who inflict emotional harm on their children are perpetrators of emotional abuse (Jindal, 2019). The hardest type of child abuse to prove is emotional abuse. There is a combination of verbal abuse and withholding of emotional support.

4. Emotional abuse has a lasting impact on the victims, even if the scars are not obvious to the human eye. Daily, those who suffer from this kind of abuse are subjected to verbal assaults that can be insulting, humiliating, shaming, threatening, intimidating, or even criticizing. Children's self-confidence and self-esteem are tampered with when they are subjected to this type of maltreatment. It can have a negative impact on a child's emotional growth, causing them to feel unworthy and inadequate. This can also result in the dwindling academic performance of the child.

In many cases, parents believe they need to physically reprimand or discipline their children. They might also believe that "harmful cultural practice" is beneficial to the child's well-being, female genital mutilation (female circumcision) is one of such instances. Physical abuse may result in permanent disability, such as becoming deaf, paralyzed, or other serious injuries. Sexual abuse is another form of child abuse. The term "sexual abuse" refers to any sort of sexual activity with a minor. This must be a person who oversees the kid for these activities to be termed child abuse; if these acts are committed by a stranger, it is considered sexual assault and handled by the police or judicial system.

Sexual assault can be broken down into three main categories:

- Physical sexual abuse, which involves touching and intercourse, is the most common kind of abuse.

- Inappropriate exposure, obscene phone calls, and "peeping toms" are examples of non-physical sexual abuse.
- Rape and other sexually aggressive behaviour are examples of violent sexual abuse.

6.2 Factors that Contribute to Child's Maltreatment

Nigeria has a high rate of child maltreatment. According to UNICEF Nigeria's Highlights 2018-2022, the key result for child abuse in all its forms is a daily reality for many Nigerian children only a fraction ever received help. Six out of every 10 children experience some violence. One in four girls and 10% of boys have been victims of sexual violence.

1. Parental neglect: When a parent or caregiver is ignorant, they are more likely to neglect a child. Parental neglect is more likely to occur when a parent does not understand the unique needs of his/her child or has not been raised in a good nurturing environment.
2. Adult maltreatment: The maltreatment of a child by an adult who is under extreme stress can be a sign of a deeper problem. A lack of emotional support for young single parents increases their risk of neglecting and abusing their children.
3. Economic and social issues: Due to the country's long-term economic difficulties, hawking has become a regular practice. To make ends meet, parents and guardians put their children and maids in harm's way by forcing them to market various foodstuffs. This can lead to undesired teenage pregnancies, abortion, or sexually transmitted infections, especially for young girls, who are enticed by the promise of money from irresponsible males. The aforementioned are part of the reasons many of these girls are out of school (dropouts) and this also affects the productivity of society because they are burdens.

Some of these children are exposed to adult vices. Children whose parents engage in vices like drinking, drug use, or prostitution are more likely to follow suit. In some cases, parents purposefully expose their children to potentially harmful behaviours by making them run errands like buying alcohol or medicines like contraception, morphine, and pethidine.

There are many reasons why a child's education may be denied. For example, they may be forced to become housemaids, street beggars, hawkers, or motor park touts because their families cannot afford proper education. In addition, an illiterate father or mother may force his or her young daughter into marriage before she is old enough to handle the weight of a pregnancy, for the most part, because of a desire for money. This can lead to divorce, disastrous marriages, and health problems like Vesicovaginal Fistula (VVF).

6.3 Prevalence of Child Abuse and Mental Health

The physical and mental development of a child is critical for overall good health and well-being throughout the lifespan. In 2016, almost 20% of children in the United States ages 2-8 years (17.4%) had a diagnosed mental, behavioural, or developmental disorder (Cree, et al. 2016). From 2008 to 2020, the rates of death from suicide among people aged 12 and above increased by 16% overall, from 14.0 per 100,000 population to 16.3 per 100,000 population. Globally, nearly 15% of young people ages 10-19 experience a mental health disorder, accounting for 13% of the global burden of disease in this age group (WHO, 2022). Nearly 3 in 4 children or 300 million children aged 2-4 years regularly suffer physical punishment and/or psychological violence at the hands of parents and caregivers. One in five women and one in three men report having been sexually abused as a child aged 0-17 years (WHO, 2022). Child sexual abuse was reported by 13.1% of girls and 4.2% of boys in a study carried out in France (Hebert, et.al. 2021). Globally, the prevalence of child sexual abuse ranges from 5% - 36% (Barth, et al., 2015).

6.4 Effects of Child's Abuse on Health and Mental Health

There is a rise in the prevalence of mental illness among adolescents and the impact of violence on this rising trend was evaluated in the South East Nigeria. Approximately 87% of the sampled adolescents had experienced at least one form of violence, 57% occurred at home, 44.2% were by relatives and 49.2% were recent cases within the six months of the study (Ughasoro, et al., 2022). Ugoji (2020) argues that the problem of child abuse is not confined to a single person or family. To avoid encountering a survivor of childhood abuse, you would have to completely avoid all human contact. Children who have been abused are more likely to have a detrimental impact on society, not just in terms of passing on the trauma they experienced to their own offspring. Abuse of children spills over into society, where it breeds callousness and cynicism, rage and violence, criminality, drugs, and illness. This reflects our country's and government's priorities, which are distorted. An added stressor such as an illness, the birth of a child or the death of an immediate family member can put a strain on an abuse survivor's ability to function in the workplace and in their personal lives.

Victims of emotional, physical, sexual, and verbal abuse suffer psychological harm that can last a lifetime. In addition, to the obvious consequences (physical injury and stress-related physical disorders), abuse can cause long-term depression, anxiety, behavioral issues, and academic difficulties. A child's physical well-being is jeopardized when they are subjected to maltreatment because of hyper-arousal of the autonomic and endocrine systems, and multiple exposures to violence and trauma. Basically, it means that the victim is hyper-aroused, and when this happens

again, it has a lasting effect on the body's physiology. Overreactions to stimuli, difficulty concentrating, emotional numbness, as well as cardiovascular problems might be recognized as the result of these alterations.

Finally, because children differ in their levels of resiliency and hardiness as well as their unique personalities, they react differently to the same kinds of abuse. Children are expected to learn everything they need to succeed in this world from their parents and caregivers. Abusing parents give their children the reverse of what they should be getting from their caregivers. Instead of promoting and fostering progress, they distort them.

7. Implications for Counselling

A counsellor's knowledge of the factors that may lead to neglect is essential to the development of intervention programs. As a result, it is important to keep in mind that not all cases in which a parent or caregiver fails to provide necessities for a child constitute neglect. There should be a properly defined treatment/service plan, with the roles of the parents and professionals clearly defined. Consider the plan to be an agreement between the family who has neglected their loved one(s) and the professional helper(s).

Therefore, situations including domestic violence and mental health issues, which affect the health and well-being of the caregiver, are typically to blame for abuse. There are distinct differences in how a counsellor intervenes when abuse is an individual and family issue versus an environmental or community one.

Three socio-ecological approaches can be used to help children who have been abused:

- A family-oriented approach is preferred.
- Using a community approach
- Integrated approach.

A family-oriented approach includes families and partners in all aspects of the educational process in as much as parents and families provide the primary learning. Community development empowers persons and groups within society to have the capacity to improve their lives. The community development approach is a positive change and value-based process which aims to address imbalances in welfare and power based on inclusion, human rights, social justice, equity, and equality.

An integrated approach on the other hand are the type of therapy in which the effective, behavioural, cognitive, physical, social and spiritual aspect of an individual.

Counselling psychologists in their intervention programmes on child's neglect should involve stakeholders such as parents, community leaders, lawmakers, faith-based groups, researchers, and other practitioners who are directly connected with children. To effectively combat child abuse, intervention programs must include the entire community, not just the family or the individual. Because of this, everyone involved in the process must work together to find a solution to the problem. Likewise, to combat child's maltreatment, counsellors are expected to have intercultural features that will help them build relationships with parents and other stakeholders because of the widespread prevalence of child abuse and neglect throughout the world's cultures. Children from a variety of cultures and backgrounds are confronted with the issue of child neglect. As a result, counselling psychologists should help improve their multicultural competency so that they can better comprehend the viewpoints of these marginalized populations. To be culturally competent, one must be able to accept and appreciate differences, have a diverse range of knowledge and abilities, and tailor services to meet the specific cultural, social, and economic demands of the target community.

Assessment of child abuse includes consideration of cultural norms and standards of care in addition to an awareness that poverty may be a factor. Culturally sensitive therapeutic treatments are essential. Counsellors must be sensitive to the cultural, religious, and religious beliefs, expectations, and conventions held by families and their children. Respect and affirming religious or spiritual values and beliefs that support responsible parenting should be respected and affirmed by helpers. They should also seek to involve males in child-caring tasks.

In formulating intervention plans, counselling psychologists should keep the children's developmental requirements top of mind as they work. This is because children who have not had their basic physical, medical, and emotional needs met are more likely to experience developmental setbacks. As part of the counsellor's intervention strategy, he or she will have to work closely with the abused children's families by acting as a mentor, coach, advocate, mediator, and ultimately a guidance counsellor, teaching them how to handle the various pressures and circumstances they face in their lives. Counsellors' treatment plans depend heavily on this. This technique will help some families learn how to address their difficulties on their own, thus reducing the culture of government dependency.

Parents may have the best of intentions, but their efforts are hampered by a lack of emotional, financial, and social support. As a result, counsellors should devise intervention plans to assist parents in providing better care for their children. Efforts should be made to foster a pleasant and responsive relationship between parents and their children. School counsellors need to be confident in their abilities to help students succeed by providing much-needed assistance to

struggling students.

7.1 Advocacy by Counsellors

When a child is abused, most of their families are poor, isolated in their communities, and lacking in access to resources. Thus, school counsellors/counselling psychologists play an important role in encouraging the government to provide both formal and informal resources such as all-encompassing drug prevention and treatment programs, enough affordable childcare initiatives, advocacy to mobilize concrete formal and informal helping resources quality education and employment opportunities, as well as accessible low-income housing.

7.2 Compulsory Disclosure

Counsellors are reminded that they must report cases of child abuse to welfare agencies in charge of children, especially in cases of severe neglect. When other forms of maltreatment are suspected and earlier efforts have failed, this is critical information to have on hand. In some circumstances, the counsellor may use legal authority to repress the parent's initial denial and disinterest. However, the threat of legal action should be utilized only as a last resort after efforts to obtain cooperation have been tried.

7.3 A Constant State of Mind

For children and their families who seek medical attention, adequacy of care and environmental factors that contribute to disease or harm must be considered. Children who have been abused in the past may require additional resources to monitor their medical, developmental/psychological, educational/safety or other concerns. Chronic neglect/abuse treatment is a long-term endeavour. An effective 12- to 18-month intervention with negligent parents is recommended. If the neglect/abuse is not an ongoing issue, a more intense intervention may be more effective. The Ministry of Education should give more recognition to counselling services in schools. Also, ensure that all schools have effective counselling and information services (Oyetade & Moses, 2018).

As part of the intervention programme, the counsellor could suggest to the government to provide the following services for neglectful families:

- Foster care that is only needed for a short time.
- Financial aid in times of need.
- Health and human services at a minimal cost to families.
- Job search assistance.

- Support and training groups for parents.
- Frequent evaluation and treatment of one's mental health.

During and after the intervention, the counsellor must continue supporting the child.

8. Child Abuse and Mental Health for Sustainable Development

Child abuse and mental health have been reported by researchers to have consequential implications on the sustainable development of countries worldwide, most especially in Nigeria. The menace of child labour, physical abuse, child neglect, child marriage, female genital mutilation, molestation, emotional and psychological resulting from poverty, cultural and religious beliefs, and poor implementation of child rights acts, among others cannot be overemphasized. Consequently, the way they are handled or tackled by every society reflects the level of productivity and development of such countries both now (present) and in future because these children are leaders of tomorrow.

This shows that the legal regulations that should have been put in place to protect and guide the children in Nigeria have also failed in their duty (Bass, 2004). Particularly, under section 17(3)(f) children ought to be guided against mistreatment and moral and material neglect. In addition, section 18 (1) stresses that the government ought to make sure that its policies offer equal and sufficient opportunities for education at any point in time. Similarly, matrimonial causes Act Cap 220, 2010 Section 71(1) in proceeding with respect to the custody, guardianship, welfare, advancement, or education of children of a marriage, the court shall regard the interest of these children as the paramount consideration.

Further, the Child Rights Act of 2003 stipulates that children must be guided against child betrothal, child marriages, unlawful sexual intercourse, child labour, unlawful custody and narcotics use (UNICEF, 2007). Unfortunately, despite these numerous provisions on children's rights, they are still exposed to all forms of discrimination, abuse, cruelty, and violence, among others (Nwokoro & Burchi, 2011). Also, a report affirms that the population of people living in poverty is 650 million children and about 130 million children do not have access to education which could have devastating implications for the sustainable development of the country across the world, Nigeria is not an exception. Equally, there is a cyclical relationship between poverty and mental illness because of inequalities in educational attainment, income, nutrition, and social support. Thus, mental health is relevant to all the Sustainable Development Goals, and it is explicitly written under goal 3.

9. Conclusion

Abuse of children can be minimized with proper instruction. Because of this, parents, educators, and other counsellors must work together to ensure that youngsters receive a sound education rather than being treated as slaves. To bring out the best in children, love must be demonstrated to them.

10. Recommendations

The following recommendations are given considering the preceding:

1. Children's moral education should be a priority for school counsellors and educators.
2. To have the number of children that is best for the family, people should be encouraged to plan their family size.
3. The government should enforce the legislation on child's rights acts to prevent the exploitation of children.
4. Counselling psychologists should always encourage and enlighten parents, guidance, and foster parents on the danger of child abuse.
5. Parents, guardians, and educators should be interested in the moral education of the children.
6. Experts should be employed by governments and non-governmental organisations to handle children's affairs to prevent molestation, exploitation, and neglect.
7. The government should come up with institutions that foster homes for abandoned children in society and collaborate with non-governmental organisations (both local and international) for financial aid, enlightenment programmes, etc.
8. The government and parents should work together on the rehabilitation and empowerment of victims.
9. Preventing child maltreatment before it starts is possible and requires a multidimensional approach. Implementing programmes that could address all forms of violence will be of added advantage.

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