

SOCIAL ETHICAL ROLE OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS IN PROTECTING CHILDREN FROM ABUSE IN WESTERN NIGERIA UNION CONFERENCE OF SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST CHURCH

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Abstract

Child abuse is a prevalent experience globally. Child abuse includes its sexual, physical, emotional abuse and neglect dimensions. Children can be abused by their parents, caregiver, schoolteachers, family members or neighbours, society leaders, or even religious leaders leading to physical injury, anxiety, depression, sexually transmitted infection, unplanned pregnancy, suicidal thoughts, and even death. Religious leaders have ethical and social roles in protecting children against any form of abuse at home, school, or society at large. This study evaluates the socio-ethical role the religious leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Western Nigerian Union Conference are playing as part of their spiritual and ethical duties in protecting children from abuse at homes, churches, schools and communities. The study investigated whether the religious leaders experienced child abuse; it examines the form(s) of abuse they experienced; it also investigates if the religious leaders prevent child abuse by creating awareness against such acts especially by using 'end it now' initiative of the Seventh –day Adventist church. The study discovered that while the religious leaders involved in the study have experienced abuse, they are not preventing or reporting cases of abuse. They have also not utilized the 'end it now' initiative of the Seventh –day Adventist church to create awareness and sensitization against child abuse. The study therefore recommends that religious leaders are to collaborate with the government and the NGOs such as WHO and UNICEF in protecting children against abuse. Through their socio-ethical leadership role, they can challenge and shape social and cultural norms that condone violence against children. This work recommends that the government should do more awareness programs on many platforms – media, newspaper, social media such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, etc, to create more awareness on the evil effects of child abuse, how to prevent it, and the legal penalty on the abusers.

Keywords: Social Ethical Roles, Religious Leaders, Child Protection, Child Abuse, Western Nigeria Union Conference, Seventh-day Adventist Church.

INTRODUCTION

Child abuse is a big challenge in nearly all the countries of the world including Nigeria. Violence against children happens in any setting – in a child's home, school, community and online. It can take many forms – physical, emotional or sexual. According to the Rainn Statistics (Accessed, August,2021), "every 68 seconds, an American is sexually assaulted. And every 9 minutes, that victim is a child. Meanwhile only 25 out of every 1,000 perpetrators will end up in prison." Children of ages 12 and 17 are mostly the victims of sexual abuse. In addition, Juvenile development experts in Nigeria have raised alarm that female genital

mutilation and child marriages were fast becoming a huge source of concern in the country. They have called on the government to mount the campaign against such trends while other stakeholders should support in dishing out information on the practices in order to reduce the rate of incidences for violent and disfiguring injuries on the genitals of young females (Olorok, 2021). Almost every day in Nigeria, there is news of one form of abuse or the other. For example, on September 2, 2021, the *Punch Newspaper* reported that an Ekiti State Magistrate Court has ordered that a woman, Titilayo Ayeni, be remanded in the custody of the Nigeria Security and Civil Defence Corps in Ado Ekiti for allegedly stabbing her 15-year-old stepdaughter on August 5, 2021 at Iyana Emirin, Federal Polytechnic Road, Ado Ekiti (*The Punch*, Friday August 20, 2021). In another story, on July 11, 2021, the Nigeria Police Force arrested Desmond Okoroafor, a resident of Aboru in the Ipaja area of Lagos, who allegedly kidnaped his neighbour's eight-year-old son and demanded N2.5m ransom from the parents of his captor (Hanafi, 2021). Another report states that the Federal Government has set up a committee to look into the circumstances leading to the death of Nuhu Yahya, a 13-year-old student of the Federal Government College, Kwali, Abuja, who died after allegedly being punished by his teacher, Mrs Gibson, for failing to do his assignment (Umoh and Ahoyi, 2021). The 'Violence Against Children' news room observed that the World Health Organisation made a global estimation of up to 1 billion children from age 2 to 17 years that have experienced sexual, physical, or emotional violence or neglect in the past one year. Bunge (2014) observed that in the society, there are negative conceptions about religion and child protection and that leads to little attention given to the positive impact religions play in child protection. Mohammed Abu-Nimer made an assertion that, "violation and abuse of children is a disease that cannot be cured without engaging all communities – Muslim, Christians, Buddhist, Hindu faith groups" (KAICIID DIALOGUE CENTRE, 2019). Moreover, the 40th session of the Human Rights Council in Geneva on 6 March 2019 where the panel brought together religious leaders, human rights experts, and representatives of UN member states, corroborates the assertion of Mohammed Abu-Nimer. There, it was clearly stated that:

Religious leaders have an important role in protecting children in their communities, and through their leadership, can challenge and shape social and cultural norms that condone violence. As trusted figures within their communities, religious leaders are uniquely positioned to promote the wellbeing of children and can speak out against practices such as female genital mutilation, abuse and neglect (HRC, 2019).

Seventh-day Adventist Church Organization in Nigeria

The Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) Church is one of the protestant churches noted as a Bible-based church. The Church was first established at Erunmu, a town in Egbeda Local Government of Oyo State, Nigeria, in 1914 by the effort of David C. Babcock, an American Missionary. From there the gospel spread to Sao, a town close to Ilorin in Kwara State and to Ipoti Ekiti in Ekiti State, and to other parts of the country (Babalola, 2020). The Western Nigeria Union Conference (WNUC) – is a level of the Church organization in the Seventh-day Adventist Church system that oversees or supervises 11 lower Church entities covering 10 States (Delta, Edo, Ekiti, Kogi, Kwara, Lagos, Ogun, Ondo, Osun, and Oyo) of the Federal Republic of Nigeria.

'End It Now' Initiative

The Seventh-day Adventist Church sees the need as a religious organization to carry out her spiritual and ethical obligation in protecting children against any form of abuse and anywhere it occurs. "It has become more and more obvious that abuse is a serious problem for Christians, for Seventh-day Adventists. Abuse in any form deforms the body of Christ—for the victim, for the perpetrator, and for the church that is left with the hurting members."

The Seventh-day Adventist Church supports the "enditnow" global initiative by the Women's Ministries Department of the Church to promote awareness and advocate for the end of violence around the world. It aims to mobilize Seventh-day Adventists around the world and invites other community groups to join in the campaign to resolve this worldwide problem. This initiative, which extends to more than 200 countries and territories of the world, was launched in October 2009 in partnership between the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA)—a prominent humanitarian organization—and the Department of Women's Ministries of the Seventh-day Adventist Church." According to the policy of ADRA, all children have equal rights to protection from exploitation and abuse (ADRA Protection Policy, Accessed 2021). By 2016, ADRA ceased involvement with "enditnow" and six departments of the Seventh-day Adventist Church joined Women's Ministries to co-sponsor the initiative. They are Children's Ministries, Department of Education, Family Ministries, Health Ministries, Ministerial Association, and Youth Ministries. Each of them is committed to developing and sharing resources that address many expressions of abuse against women, children, and men.

Karen Flowers, associate director of Family Ministries at the world headquarters of the Seventh-day Adventist Church said, "We must face this evil and name this challenge for what it is—sin. It is something that comes from the devil. We need to meet this evil with spiritual weapons as well as with support, anger management, shelters, counselling, and the other usual tools," she concluded. Abuse Prevention Emphasis Day began in 2001. The Annual Council of the Church voted on September 16, 2001, to add an Abuse Prevention Emphasis Day to the annual worldwide church calendar of special days as the fourth Sabbath in August. Since then, the fourth Sabbath (Saturday) of August is always observed as Abuse Prevention Emphasis Day, which provides an annual opportunity for local churches throughout the world to address the issue of violence, to educate church leadership and members, to facilitate awareness in their communities, and to let victims know that the church cares about them.

The Role of Government and NGOs

The WHO and the UNICEF are playing significant roles in the prevention of children from abuse or neglect. The government of Nigeria has put in place some institutions charged with the responsibilities of protecting children from violence. There is National and State Child Rights Implementation Committees; Child Development Departments in the Federal and State Ministries of Women Affairs; National Council of Child Rights Advocates of Nigeria (NACCRAN) as the umbrella NGO in the advocacy of Child Rights; and there is the Nigerian Children's Parliament (Country Report on Violence Against Children, 2014).

Child Abuse – Definition

According to Cambridge Dictionary, abuse, as a verb, means to use something for the wrong purpose in a way that is harmful or morally wrong; to treat someone cruelly or violently. It

also means to speak to someone rudely or cruelly; the use of something in a way that is harmful or morally wrong e.g. an abuse of privilege or power. When used as a noun, it means bad or cruel treatment of a person or animal, or the use of something in an unsuitable or wrong way. In medical terms, it means to treat in a harmful, injurious, or offensive way; to speak insultingly, harshly, and unjustly to or about; revile; malign. *Macmillan Dictionary* defined abuse as cruel, violent, or unfair treatment, especially of someone who does not have the power to prevent it. From the above definitions, it is clear that abuse can take different forms – verbal, emotional, or physical, etc. The WHO states clearly that, “violence against children includes all forms of violence against people under 18 years old, whether perpetrated by parents or other caregivers, peers, romantic partners, or strangers” (Violence Against Children News Room, Accessed 2/9/2021).

Types of Abuse

This study concurs with Sherri Gordon who says, “Everyone deserves to be treated with kindness and respect” (Gordon, 2020). In the first place, no form of violence against children is justifiable, and violence against children is preventable. The WHO as at 2006 distinguishes four types of child abuse: sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional or psychological abuse, and neglect.

- (a) **Physical Abuse:** Lenane (2007) posits that child physical abuse is the non-accidental injury of a child... Injuries include bruises, lacerations, blunt trauma, fractures, [head trauma](#), shaking, burns, and poisoning. The WHO defines physical abuse as “intentional use of physical force against the child that results in – or has a high likelihood of resulting in – harm for the child’s health, survival, development, or dignity. This includes hitting, beating, kicking, shaking, biting, strangling, scalding, burning, poisoning, and suffocating.” It is an intentional not accidental act against a child. Physical abuse – such as beating or flogging the child with dangerous weapon – may result to serious injury. Physical abuse happens in almost every home including Christian homes. Even if we have not suffered abuse when we were young we may have witnessed a child being abused physically either by the parents or older siblings. Worse still, babysitters may be the ones maltreating the infants they are supposed to look after (Kunhiyop, 2008). Physical child abuse by parents or caregivers may result in skeletal injury or burns. In order to “determine whether a child's injury was likely to have been inflicted rather than accidental, the clinician must establish the full extent of the injury and must understand the child's developmental level and abilities” (Giardino, 2017).

Sexual Abuse

According to the American Psychological Association (APA Accessed, 9/9/2021) maintains that “sexual **abuse** is unwanted sexual activity, with perpetrators using force, making threats or taking advantage of victims not able to give consent.” While according to UNICEF, **sexual exploitation** refers to any actual or attempted abuse of a position of vulnerability, differential power, or trust, for sexual purposes, perpetrated by aid workers against the children and families they serve.

Emotional Abuse

According to Sherri Gordon, “Emotional abuse is a way to control another person by using emotions to criticize, embarrass, shame, blame, or otherwise manipulate another person.

Emotional abuse is one of the hardest forms of abuse to recognize. It can be subtle and insidious or overt and manipulative (Gordon, 2020). Emotional abuse destroys the victim's self-esteem. Its underlying goal is to control the victim by discrediting, isolating, and silencing. Emotionally abusive people display unrealistic expectations. Some examples include: When parents or caregivers are making unreasonable demands of any child, that child is being abused emotionally; or expecting the child to put everything aside and meet their needs; or being dissatisfied no matter how hard the child tries or how much the child gives; or criticizing the child for not completing tasks according to their standards. Another form of emotional abuse is blackmail. A parent or teacher may become emotionally abusive person by blackmailing the child. Examples of such may include: controlling or manipulating the child by making him or her guilty; or by humiliating the child in the public or even in private; or by exaggerating the flaws of the child; or punishing the child by withholding affection or giving that child a silent treatment (Gordon).

Neglect

Leaving children who are too young to look after themselves in a home to care for themselves is an abusive act of neglect. Failure on the part of parents or caregivers to provide regular medical care, adequate shelter, or emotional support is also an abuse (Theoharis, 2021). Child neglect is the failure of a parent or caregiver to provide the basic needs of life – such as food, clothing, shelter, medical care, to the point that the child's health, safety or well-being may be threatened. It is also a failure on the part of people surrounding a child to give him or her attention, love, and nurturing; and the non-provision of adequate relevant necessities for the child's survival. Data supplied by state Child Protective Services (CPS, 2010) Agencies to the United States federal government, it was discovered that neglect or neglectful behaviour was the most common form of child maltreatment. There are six categories of neglect – emotional neglect, physical neglect, supervisory neglect, medical neglect, educational neglect, and abandonment.

Effect of Child Abuse

Child abuse can lead to physical injury, anxiety, depression, sexually transmitted infection, unplanned pregnancy, suicidal thoughts, and even death (Child Protection, 2020). Unfortunately, the most devastating types of violence are often hidden from public view most of the time. Perpetrators do everything to conceal their acts, and leaving the victims (children) - especially those who are ignorant of their experience and lack the capacity to report - vulnerable to further exposure.

Seventh-day Adventists Position on the Fight against Child Abuse

The Seventh-day Adventist Church has clear statements on abuse and family violence. This should guide the church leaders in the Western Nigeria Union Conference as they carry out their religious and ethical responsibilities on this issue. "Seventh-day Adventists affirm the dignity and worth of each human being and decry all forms of physical, sexual and emotional abuse and family violence. We recognize the global extent of this problem and the serious, long-term effects upon the lives of all involved. We believe that Christians must respond to abuse and family violence both within the church and in the community. The Seventh-day Adventists believe what the holy Bible says that, "children are a heritage from the Lord and that the fruit of the womb is a reward" (Psalm 127:3). Since children are gifts from God, therefore parents are caretakers. It is expedient that every couple should embrace family

planning. There is no need of giving birth to four children, for example, when the income of the couple can only adequately take care of two children. It is ethically wrong on the part of any parent to subject children to unnecessary hardship because the parents cannot meet the basic needs, which the children are entitled to. Street hawking by children exposes them to unnecessary risks like rape, accident, physical assault, emotional abuse, and things of such nature.

Socio-Ethical Role of Religious Leaders

Religious leaders have a responsibility and vital role to play in protecting the rights of children and preventing violence against them. They should be voice to the voiceless children by reporting the abuser to the key stakeholders – government, social welfare and justice services that prevent and respond to violence against children. The Bible says, "Speak up for those who cannot speak for themselves; defend the rights of all those who have nothing." —Proverbs 31:8. In short, religious leaders have power to raise awareness and influence attitudes, behaviours and practices of people (Jailobaeva, 2021). The government of Nigeria has been playing some roles in ensuring that children are protected from abuse. The WHO and the UNICEF are doing their parts to protect children from abuse. However, the roles of religious leaders cannot be under-estimated in the campaign against child abuse. Religious leaders are being saddled with the responsibilities of shaping the social values of the society in line with their faith-based teachings. Unfortunately, many of the religious leaders who experienced physical abuse when they were young are not even doing much in advocating against child physical abuse.

Methodology

The researcher adopted random sampling method in 6 states out of 10 states that the Western Nigeria Union Conference covers. The followings are the number of religious leaders interviewed randomly in various church entities and their responses. Osun State has 22 ordained pastors and 15 un-ordained pastors in 15 districts. Fifteen ordained pastors and 10 un-ordained pastors randomly picked across the 15 districts for interview. Ogun State has 18 ordained pastors and 13 un-ordained pastors in 8 districts. Eight ordained pastors and eight un-ordained pastors selected randomly across the districts. Ekiti State has 17 ordained pastors and 8 un-ordained pastors in 14 districts. Fourteen ordained pastors and 7 un-ordained pastors randomly selected across the 14 districts. Ondo State has 9 ordained pastors and 8 un-ordained pastors in 8 districts. Eight ordained pastors and 8 un-ordained pastors randomly picked for interview. Delta State has 12 ordained pastors and 17 un-ordained pastors in 16 districts. Ten ordained pastors and 12 un-ordained pastors randomly picked for interview. Edo State has 5 ordained pastors and 20 un-ordained pastors in 12 districts. Five ordained pastors and 12 un-ordained pastors randomly chosen for interview.

Analysis of the Role Seventh Day Adventist Pastors in Western Nigerian Union Conference Played in Prevention of Child Abuse

In the interview conducted with the religious leaders of Seventh-day Adventists in six randomly selected states under the West Nigerian Union, the following constitute the findings regarding roles that the pastors have played in the prevention of child abuse.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church in Osun State has 22 ordained pastors and 15 un-ordained pastors in 15 districts. Fifteen ordained pastors and 10 un-ordained pastors were randomly

picked across the 15 districts for interview. Out of the 25 interviewed, 23 experienced physical abuse in their childhood; 11 by teachers, 8 by parents, and 4 by siblings. Twelve of them have witnessed family violence against children in the church family and the society. None of them ever reported any case of child abuse to governmental agencies. None of them ever conducted seminars on how to protect children from child abuse. The “enditnow” program against abuse takes place once in a year and it is left for the department of the women in the church to handle.

In Ogun State there are 18 ordained pastors and 13 un-ordained pastors in 8 districts. Eight ordained pastors and eight un-ordained pastors were selected randomly across the districts. Among the 16 pastors interviewed, 14 experienced physical abuse at childhood by their teachers, also 9 among them by their parents, and 4 by siblings. Eight out of them have witnessed violence against children at homes, schools, and communities. None of them ever reported any case of child abuse to governmental agencies, and none of them ever conducted training or seminar program on how to protect children against abuse.

In Ekiti State there are 17 ordained pastors and 8 un-ordained pastors in 14 districts. Fourteen ordained pastors and 7 un-ordained pastors were randomly selected across the 14 districts. Among the 21 pastors interviewed, 21 experienced physical abuse at childhood by their teachers, also 16 among them by their parents, and 9 by siblings. Eleven out of them have witnessed violence against children at homes, schools, and communities. None of them ever reported any case of child abuse to governmental agencies, and none of them ever conducted training or seminar program on how to protect children against abuse.

In Ondo State there are 9 ordained pastors and 8 un-ordained pastors in 8 districts. Eight ordained pastors and 8 un-ordained pastors were randomly picked for interview. Among the 16 pastors interviewed, 14 experienced physical abuse at childhood by their teachers, also 8 among them by their parents, and 5 by sibling. Eleven out of them have witnessed violence against children at homes, schools, and communities. None of them ever reported any case of child abuse to governmental agencies, and none of them ever conducted training or seminar program on how to protect children against abuse.

In Delta State there are 12 ordained pastors and 17 un-ordained pastors in 16 districts. Ten ordained pastors and 12 un-ordained pastors were randomly picked for interview. Among the 22 pastors interviewed, 18 experienced physical abuse at childhood by their teachers, also 14 among them by their parents, and 10 by siblings. Eleven out of them have witnessed violence against children at homes, schools, and communities. None of them ever reported any case of child abuse to governmental agencies, and none of them ever conducted training or seminar program on how to protect children against abuse.

In Edo State there are 5 ordained pastors and 20 un-ordained pastors in 12 districts. Five ordained pastors and 12 un-ordained pastors were randomly chosen for interview. Among the 17 pastors interviewed, 14 experienced physical abuse at childhood by their teachers, also 9 among them by their parents, and 5 by siblings. Nine out of them have witnessed violence against children at homes, schools, and communities. None of them ever reported any case of child abuse to governmental agencies, and none of them ever conducted training or seminar program on how to protect children against abuse.

From the above analysis, 117 religious leaders were interviewed and 104 of them experienced physical abuse during childhood; the percentage is 88.8%. None of the interviewees ever reported any case of abuse to governmental or non-governmental agencies, and none ever conducted seminar on how to protect children from abuse.

Findings

From the study carried out, it is obvious that the Seventh – day Adventist pastors in Western Nigerian Union Conference have been indifferent about the issue of child abuse. The religious leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are not doing enough in advocating for the rights of children and protecting them against abuse. These religious leaders have made no conspicuous effort to report, prevent or create awareness about the ills of child abuse in their jurisdiction. The failure to carry out the socio –ethical duty may be largely due to ignorance about the roles religious leaders and pastors should play in the prevention and mitigation of child abuse. Furthermore, the apathy may be due to lack of training and resources for religious leaders in preventing child abuse.

Conclusion

Members of the community including political leaders listen to religious leaders when they speak. Religious leaders have been endowed with power to raise awareness and to also influence attitudes, behaviours and practices of people (Jailobaeva 2021). The government of Nigeria should give proper recognition to the religious leaders by organizing training programs for them on what they can do as major stakeholders in advocating for child abuse-free society. They are not to be recognized only when they are needed for electioneering. Religious leaders can draw their strength from Jesus' approach to the mistreatment of children during his earthly ministry. If religious leaders must perform any role in preventing child abuse or confronting the abuser in all its forms, they themselves must understand it to be a misconduct attitude that God frowns at. They should not be child abuser themselves, but live by example. The way the religious leaders understand child abuse would determine how they would respond to it. For example if religious leaders believe that \physical abuse is bad and ethically wrong, they would find a way of helping the victims and confront the perpetrators.

Recommendations

This work recommends that the government should do more awareness programs on many platforms – media, newspaper, social media such as Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp, and other social media outfits to create more awareness on the evil effects of child abuse, how to prevent it, and the legal penalty on the abusers.

In addition, it recommends that all the religious leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Western Nigeria Union Conference should champion the 'enditnow' initiative in their communities by organizing regular seminars in public places and holding rallies. By so doing, other religious groups may join in the campaign for child protection. A lot of seminar materials are available at the Seventh-day Adventist Church website on "enditnow."

It further recommends that the government should create a platform where various religious leaders of different faiths, together with the NGOs can come together for partnership in advocating for child protection against any form of abuse since the government cannot do the work alone.

It is recommended that the Government – at the federal, state, and local levels – should not just make child abuse laws but ensure that such laws are religiously implemented in order to protect children against any form of violence because abuse hinders children from growing up to their potentials and thus negatively affects the development of any nation.

Finally, this work recommends that the religious leaders who happen to be major stakeholders with social, spiritual, and ethical responsibilities should be number one advocate for the child protection and provision of basic needs for their physical, mental, social, psychological, and spiritual development. Their spiritual responsibility to protect the dignity of the children begins in their own homes before extending to the churches, and the communities. Also, it is their moral and ethical duty to ensure the children are not molested by unscrupulous individuals.

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